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# **“Airing Dirty Laundry”: Chinese and Chinese-American responses to Amy Tan**

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## Abstract

Amy Tan, the author of *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), and *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005), is accused of being a “fake” Chinese American writer by radical Chinese American critics such as Frank Chin. I consider Tan’s fictional writing of the experience of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American born daughters to be an experiment in cross-cultural communication. Such communication may be highly personal and subjective to Tan, who claims to write so that her mother can understand her feelings and to remember what she has learned from her Chinese side. I also believe her writings create an opportunity for bi- (or cross-) cultural communication and it matches the concept of harmony in Chinese traditional philosophy.

In Chinese scholar Jianjun Zou’s opinion, Tan’s works represent the notion of reconciliation, and that all of these works shall be viewed as a whole is the inspiration of this thesis. Reconciliation in terms of Tan’s works has three parts, which are: (1) the reconciliation between languages; (2) the reconciliation between genders; (3) the reconciliation among generations. The existence of reconciliation proves that Tan’s writing about the Chinese community is multi-dimensional. From my point of view, she should not be simply defined as a stereotype writer whose works can only reinforce the prejudices against the Chinese community and Chinese men. In my opinion, for Chinese American criticism, violation of the women’s right to tell of the oppression from the Chinese traditional family values should not be the solution to the prejudices of the white dominant culture. For Chinese critics in Chinese speaking regions, especially in China, I suggest that we should have a humble attitude towards the Chinese American literature because the “real” and the “fake” are difficult to define, even in the motherland of Chinese culture.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1. Searching for Reconciliation

Born in 1952, Oakland of California, Chinese American female writer Amy Tan/*TAN EN MEI* has to date authored five published novels: *The Joy Luck Club* (1989); *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991); *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995); *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), and *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005); two children's books and other non-fictional works, such as *The Opposite of Fate* (2004), a collection of her essays. Among all of Tan's works, *The Joy Luck Club*, as her first published novel, achieved the most outstanding success and popularity. It was on the New York Times bestseller list for nine months and translated into many languages. Several literary awards and nominations have been granted to Tan for her work on *The Joy Luck Club*, which was also made into a motion picture in 1993.

When I was struggling to find a theme for the entire project, it was Chinese scholar Jianjun Zou's book, *Positive and Negative Dimensions of "Harmony": On the Ethical Thoughts in Amy Tan's Novels* that gave me the most prominent inspiration on the issue of reconciliation. Zou's work, also known as the first published book in the Chinese language that focuses on Tan's five published fictional works, is based on one of the traditional Chinese philosophical notions, “和” (harmony and reconciliation). Inspired by Zou, I view the main theme in Tan's mother-daughter narratives as searching for reconciliation between the Chinese mothers and the American-born daughters. Tan has claimed several times that her novels are dedicated to her mother;

however, in my opinion, there are actually three forms of reconciliation within Tan's works, of which the mother-daughter reconciliation is just one. These three types of reconciliation are: (1) the reconciliation between languages; (2) the reconciliation between genders; (3) the reconciliation among generations. Their existence proves that Tan's writing about the Chinese community is multi-dimensional. From my point of view, she should not be simply defined as a stereotype writer who can only reinforce the prejudices against the Chinese community and Chinese men.

## **1.2. "Airing Dirty Laundry"**

The striking achievement of Tan has established her significant position in Chinese American literature and drawn attention from critics and scholars, whose research on Tan involves different kinds of issues, such as racial identity, cultural interactions and conflicts, linguistic features of her writing, or the psychological characteristics of her characters, in both the United States and China.

### **1.2.1. The Debate about the "Real" and the "Fake" in the United States**

According to Bella Adams, the author of *Amy Tan*, "Orientalism versus counter-Orientalism" is a "typically occurred" issue in Asian American studies and often "degenerates into uncritical arguments about the 'real' versus the 'fake'" (24). Similarly, as a part of Asian American studies, I notice that the studies on Amy Tan's

fiction works, are also strongly associated with this “typically occurred” issue and the debate about “real” and “fake,” as Adams indicates. I believe this situation is a result of the fact that Chinese American history, in Adams’ opinion, “at worst,” is “marked by violation, segregation and, ultimately, exclusion from the US; and, at best ‘seemingly benign stereotypes ... see Chinese people from a limited-and limiting-perspective’” (*Amy Tan* 3). On the one hand, because of traditional Chinese gender roles, Chinese culture and Chinese men are seen as misogynistic. In addition, owing to the strong prejudices and racism against early Chinese labourers in agriculture and industry, a large number were excluded from farms, factories and mines. They were obliged to be self-employed and work as cooks, restaurant waiters, and laundrymen, in occupations which are considered women’s jobs by mainstream white culture. Therefore, Chinese male immigrants have been feminized. Meanwhile, they were also considered sojourners who were never fully accepted as part of United States society, and restricted by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Finally, the early Chinese American community turned into a bachelor community, in which prostitution was thriving because of the absence of wives. The stereotype of feminized Chinese men has been influential and utilized by racist writers, film makers, and mainstream media to promote Orientalism, since the nineteenth century. Hence, for many Chinese American scholars, correcting the stereotypes of Chinese Americans in popular culture becomes one main strategy to fight against the prejudices and racism of the dominant white culture. At the same time, some of these scholars such as Frank Chin, also point out that the stereotypes are not only practised

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by white racist writers, but also by some “fake” Chinese American writers who have been educated to believe the stereotypes of Chinese men since childhood. Along with Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Hwang, Amy Tan is defined as an example of the “fake” Chinese American writers, as opposed to Frank Chin himself, the “real.”

This thesis is named “Airing Dirty Laundry” for the similarities between Chin’s opinions about the “fake” and African American critic Ishmael Reed’s notion of “Airing Dirty Laundry,” which was the initial inspiration of this study. According to Reed, writings by African Americans that negatively portray the African American community engage in “airing dirty laundry” because they feed the mainstream media’s long term passion for demonizing African American men. Social problems such as crime, drugs, poverty, female abuse, single mothers, and violence trouble every ethnic group but, as Reed (15) argues, because the “media are willing to promote a racial war in America in order to boost their ratings,” they depict these problems as exclusive to the African American community. For example, as writer Brent Staples pointed out, while “gang violence is often thought of as a black problem ... Latinos lead the country [the United States] in gang killings, with Asians tending toward extortion and theft” (qtd. in Reed: 10). With regard to the single mother issue, Reed suggests that many more white women than black women are left in poverty by their husbands, but the media make this issue appear a problem that only exists in the African American community. Moreover, images of African Americans are frequently associated with violence and crime by the news networks, although the organized crimes of Irish American, Jewish American, and Italian



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American gangs are much more threatening than those “amateurish black muggers and crackers” (20). Overall, blacks are blamed by the media and “black-pathology thinkers” for all of the United States’ social problems.

Moreover, compared to African American women, Reed believes that black men are more endangered by these media propagated racist stereotypes. In addition to condemnation from the mainstream media, the liberal wing of the feminist movement also regards black men as the misogynistic “meta-enemy of women” and those who “take rap for all men” (xx). Meanwhile, they have also been betrayed by some of their own people, who have joined the team of bashing the black community with “airing dirty laundry” confessions in public. In Reed’s point of view, Gerald Early, a middle-class black college professor, who had been manipulated by the media to comment on fatherless childhood and violence on programmes such as National Public Radio’s “Fresh Air,” is an example of this category. Apart from Early, some African American writers are said by Reed to accentuate negative images of the black community in their writings, which then get the attention of the media and other organizations and thereby exacerbate African-American bashing. For example, it is alleged by Reed that a “black conservative writer” was nominated for “his ability to needle blacks” rather than for the quality of his works (3); a “prominent black woman” was congratulated by the *New York Times* for having the courage to talk about the root of the problems in the black community and break the silence, which actually has already been broken many times (6).

In contrast to African Americans, especially African American men, Asian

Americans have, in more recent times, been portrayed by mainstream media as the “model minority,” who stay away from troubles and are successful (but still feminized). Reed demolishes this theory and argues that the media have been misleading the public on the issue of Asian American social problems as well. For example, he points out:

Chinese American gangs control 60 percent of New York’s heroin trade – a fact that doesn’t attract the attention of conservative writers who always lecture blacks about drug-related crime. When it comes to criminal gangs, however, the media and the segregated American opinion industry seem incapable of seeing any colo[u]r other than black (8).

In addition to colour-blindness, Reed claims that mainstream media in the United States appear to be selectively deaf. The voice of “black intellectuals, writers, and scientists” (xxii) who offer different opinions is ignored because they do not fit the bill of a limited range of African Americans who are featured on television, such as athletes or entertainers. Moreover, just as mainstream media “speak” for blacks, Reed believes that the media also “speak” for Asian Americans and ignore “militant” Asian American intellectuals’ harsh criticism of U.S. society (9).

Reed points to Chinese American critic Frank Chin as a representative of this “militant Asian American intellectuals group” and he cites him in *Airing Dirty Laundry* for his severe reply to Andrew Hacker, who wrote a typical black bashing/Asian praising article:

Just because we read, write and speak your language as well as you do, Mr.

Hacker, does not mean we believe your rhetoric, agree with your racist cowardice.... The Asian or black or any non-white 'model minority' Shangri-la people is a fiction, a product of white racist self-serving wishful thinking, not reality (qtd. in Reed: 9).

Apart from both Reed and Chin being critical of mainstream media's racist and stereotypical propaganda and reports about the minority groups, the two also share similar opinions of publishers who favour certain writers from each of their ethnic groups for their reinforcement of white stereotypes. For Reed, black writers who negatively portray the black community are engaged in "airing dirty laundry," whereas, for Chin, Chinese writers who reiterate white stereotypes are "fake," in contradistinction to the "real" Chinese American writers including himself. In Chin's article "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Tan is regarded as a "fake" Chinese American writer, along with Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Hwang, because of her characterization of Chinese men and her adaptations or even creations of Chinese fairy tales in her work *The Joy Luck Club*. To Chin, Tan's work is a contribution to the racist stereotype of Chinese people, particularly Chinese men.

Apart from Chin, other critics such as Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong also question Tan's ethnic authenticity in her essay "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon." She asks: "Tan's stellar status in the publishing world, further assured by *The Kitchen God's Wife*, causes one to wonder: wherein does the enormous appeal of her fiction lie" (175). Mistakes, such as the inaccurate translation of the

Chinese word *tang jie* into “sugar sisterhood” or celebrating certain traditional festivals in some incorrect ways, have little impact on Tan’s success. These incorrect descriptions of Chinese folklores, traditional customs, and language, in Wong’s opinion, demonstrate Orientalism in Tan’s novels. Similarly, Patricia Chu is also concerned whether Tan’s Chinese narratives are reinforcing Orientalism and the stereotypes of the Chinese community. For example, Wong and Chu echo each other in their utilization of Johannes Fabian’s theory of “temporal distancing” in Amy Tan studies. They both point out that Tan’s texts enforce the stereotypical understanding of China. By setting the Chinese mothers’ stories in pre-1950s China and the US American born daughters’ stories in late 1980s America, China is portrayed as a country forever in its past, in contrast to the highly modernized the United States. Chu further indicates that even if Tan’s Chinese American mother characters are different to their stereotypical images in U.S. popular culture, she is still stereotypical writing about the entire Chinese society by not showing the modernization process of 1920s-1940s China and the radical social changes during that period. Meanwhile, Tan’s lack of descriptions about the Chinese immigrant mothers’ “struggle to survive” (153) strengthens her “utopian view of American immigration” (143), according to Chu.

Tan responded in 1996 in her essay, “Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects,” to those who saw her work as negative towards the images of Chinese and Chinese Americans. She pointed out that there was “a growing assumption” that “the writer--any writer--by virtue of being published, has a responsibility to the reader”

and “woe are you if the Asian American reviewer champions both ethnic correctness and marginalism, believes your fiction should not depict violence, sexual abuse, mixed marriages, superstitions, Chinese as Christians, or mothers who speak in broken English” (7). She gives the example of a professor from a school in Southern California who told her that he used her novels in his classes to “lambast those passages that depict China as backward or unattractive.” Basically, he “objected to any descriptions that had to do with spitting, filth, poverty, or superstitions.” When Tan asked him “if China in the 1930s and 1940s was free of these elements,” he answered no and admitted her descriptions were true, but still insisted that it was the obligation of the writer of ethnic literature to “create positive, progressive images.” Apart from this professor, a student from UC Berkeley once “swaggered up” to Tan at a book signing event and, “in a loud voice” asked: “Don’t you think you have the responsibility to write about Chinese men as positive role models” (7). From these incidents, we can learn that to stand against these prejudices and racism, Tan, like many other writers from ethnic groups, is required to avoid the negative depiction of the Chinese community because this kind of portrayal may be utilized by white racists.

Furthermore, Tan points out that there is “an ethnic authority,” which is like “a new and more insidious form of censorship [which] has crept into the fold, winning followers by wearing the cloak of good intentions and ethnic correctness.” She goes on to say,

“And it disturbs me, this trend in thinking, that there are those who think that

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literature has a predefined purpose. It terrifies me that well-meaning people are determining what literature must mean and say and do. And it infuriates me when people use the so-called authority of their race, gender, and class to stipulate who should write what and why. What exactly are their qualifications” (6).

In Tan’s opinion, literature should be free from the responsibility of educating its readers. Racial stereotypes in the living world will not disappear just because they are eliminated in fiction. Moreover, she sees herself as an *American*, not a Chinese American writer and simultaneously insists on her rights as one: “I have the freedom to write whatever I want [and] I claim that freedom” (7). In addition, not only Amy Tan, but her mother Daisy Tan also claims her right to tell of the tragic past. When she was asked by other people: “That was China. It’s past. You must accept it, why tell it,” she once answered “Why should I accept? I will never accept what happened to me. Tell the world” (qtd. in *Amy Tan*. Adams. 72).

Should Tan and her mother be quiet about the past? The answer to this question can be debatable. On the one hand, elements such as concubine, opium and domestic violence against women are utilized by white racists to orientalize, other, and stereotype the Chinese community. By writing of these elements in her Chinese narratives, Tan can be used by white racists to reinforce the stereotypes of the Chinese, no matter what her intentions are. On the other hand, her mother-daughter narratives are based on her immigrant mother Daisy Tan’s experience and her own life story as an American born daughter. Some negative portrayals of the Chinese community

within these narratives actually reflect a certain amount of truth such as the inferior social status of Chinese women. I find a saying from Chinese American scholar Amy Ling is quite helpful in Tan's case. When discussing the stereotypes of Asian women which contain elements such as "long fingernails, slit dress, smiling behind one's hand," Ling, in her book *Between Worlds*, points out: "like all stereotypes, these contain a kernel of truth" (10-11). In the nineteenth century, these elements did exist in Chinese society. Similarly, when Tan has been criticized for her negative portrayals of the Chinese community, her mother Daisy Tan's early experience actually contains the elements that are used in stereotypes. For instance, Daisy Tan was a victim of domestic violence and her mother was a concubine who committed suicide by swallowing a large amount of opium. Overall, Ling's question reflects several important issues in Chinese American literary criticism: (1) Should art be created only for the purpose of art or has it to be associated with social responsibilities; (2) Is it necessary to silence Chinese women's talk about their past and tragedy, in order to correct the prejudices and racism against the Chinese community?

With regarding to the first question, Amy Ling asks: "Must the multicultural writer/artist be totally and exclusively answerable to his or her ethnic communities, be the spokesperson of that community, tell the community's stories and tell them accurately?" Moreover, she also "wonders": "Can the writer/artist claim the right to express his or her "individual vision" and "personal concerns," and, "Can this writer/artist "modify the myths and legends of a group to his/her own artistic purpose?" (195-96). It might be difficult to just give a simple "yes/no" answer to

Ling's questions. However, one thing that is certain is that Frank Chin, who has been accusing Tan of rewriting Chinese folklore, has made many modifications to Chinese culture in his article "Come All Ye" and his fiction writings of Chinese masculinity.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, if Tan can be accused of adaptations of Chinese culture, it seems that Chin is not eligible to be the Amy Tan basher. For the second question, Chinese American scholar King-kok Cheung's argument is helpful in my analysis. In her article "The Woman Warrior Versus the Chinaman Pacific," Cheung indicates: "[w]omen of color should not have to undergo a self-division resulting from having to choose between female and ethnic identities" (319). Moreover, I have to agree with Cheung's arguments that the attacks on stereotypes should not be based on "falling prey to their binary opposites" (319), and Chinese Americans shall "refrain from seeking antifeminist solutions to racism" (317).

The matrilineal discourse is another crucial issue in Amy Tan studies in Chinese American literary criticism and is part of this research on the reconciliation within Tan's novels. According to Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, the mother-daughter dyad is one major reason for Tan's achievement in the United States, because as part of the feminist movement, matrilineal discourse "has been gathering momentum in the United States over the last ten to fifteen years" (176).<sup>2</sup> Tan's novels are dedicated to her mother. Seeking communication and understanding between the immigrant mothers and the American born daughters is the dominant theme in Tan's works. Meanwhile, owing to the bicultural background, Tan's mother-daughter dyad is

<sup>1</sup> Examples can be found in Chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> My copy of Wong's article is from the book *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, published in 1995 and edited by David Palumbo-Liu.



inevitably associated with cultural issues. As Helena Grice suggested, “the loss” of one’s mother is also “partly a loss of the mother-culture” (45). Therefore, rebuilding the damaged connection with the mother figure, in my opinion, is an approach to the “mother-culture.” Moreover, Marina Heung in her essay “Daughter-Text/Mother Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*,” argues that Tan “move[s]” the mother, who is an othered figure in the family, “from object to subject” (qtd. in Heung. 598), by “foregrounding the voices of mothers as well as of daughters” (599). This feature makes Tan’s *Joy Luck* different from other Asian American female works such as “*Nisei Daughter*, *Obasan*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Crossings*” (598). In addition, as Dunick pointed out, the specialty of Tan’s mother-daughter narrative is also represented by the written texts authored by Chinese mothers in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, which, from my point of view, needs more attention from critics for its distinct “grandmother text/narrative”.

### 1.2.2. Response to Amy Tan in China

Chinese American literary criticism in China is a comparatively recent research field. However, the number of academic articles focusing on Tan is still considerable and has been increasing in recent years. According to the database of CNKI (Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure), Amy Tan studies in China started with Yidai Feng’s article, “*Tan En Mei Yu ‘Xi Fu Hui’*” (Xiujuan Yu 1)<sup>3</sup>. It was published in a Chinese journal, *Reading*, in 1993. Searching by the keyword *Tan En Mei* in the CNKI database, there are 475 articles from journals or newspapers, 163

<sup>3</sup> Translation: “Amy Tan and ‘Joy Luck Club’.”

master theses and 11 PhD theses. Research topics about Tan's works are becoming more varied. Nevertheless, cultural studies and feminism are key issues in the field of Amy Tan studies, but for example, Jianjun Zou, who can be seen as an Amy Tan supporter, entitles his PhD thesis, "Positive and Negative Dimensions of 'Harmony': On the Ethical Thoughts in Amy Tan's Novels," and writes from the angle of ethnic censorship which is based on the Chinese traditional philosophy of *Her* (harmony). Xiujuan Yu's PhD thesis, "Fan Dong Fang Zhu Yi Mian Ju Hou De Dong Fang Zhu Yi: Tan En Mei Zuo Pin Xu Shu Mo Shi Fen Xi,"<sup>4</sup> examines the narrative structure in Tan's novels. In her analysis, Yu claims that Tan's mother-daughter narrative is actually a type of Orientalism. For instance, Tan's descriptions of the Chinese immigrant mothers' lives when they have just arrived in the United States are comparatively shortened and less detailed. Echoing Patricia Chu's opinion of the "utopian view of American immigration," Yu believes that this arrangement in narrative pattern clearly demonstrates Tan's Orientalism and her intention of disguising the prejudices, racism or other elements that are negative towards the United States.

Apart from Tan's works, the literary fights over how Chinese people, especially Chinese men, shall be portrayed in literature by Chinese American writers such as Amy Tan, also attract academic attention in Chinese speaking regions, especially in mainland China. For example, Chaojie Wang uses a metaphorical line from an ancient Chinese poem to point out that the fight between Chinese American

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<sup>4</sup> Translation: Orientalism Behind the Mask of Anti-Orientalism: Studies on the Narrative Pattern in Amy Tan's Works

masculinist writers and the feminist writers are like a war between siblings who originate from the same family. According to Chaojie Wang, Chinese American men have been feminized and stereotyped by white racists in the United States. Their experience is a history of oppression. However, when masculinist writers attempt to correct the prejudice, they demand that Chinese women be silent about their inferior social status in traditional Chinese society. On the other hand, feminist writers have been creating a new image of Chinese women, one which shows them as having the courage and strong will to fight for their freedom and rights, unlike the old stereotypes of their passivity. But this action is often at the cost of reinforcing the stereotypes of Chinese men. Another Chinese scholar, Wenshu Zhao, sees both of these groups as Orientalist who modify Chinese myths and folklore into an Americanized version, containing meanings directly opposite the essence of the original. According to Zhao, many Chinese American women writers like Kingston stereotype Chinese men in order to highlight Chinese American women's rebellious features that speak to Western feminism and which appeal to white women in the United States. On the other hand, some Chinese American male writers, such as Chin, are turning the entire Chinese culture into another version of American culture in their writings by Westernizing Chinese mythology, fairy tales and Confucian theories, and by making mistakes when translating Chinese classics.

With regard to this debate of "real" and "fake" Chinese American writers in the United States, and how Chinese critics in Sinophone countries treat works written in English about Chinese elements, Zhiyan Fang warns, in her article "Foreign

Landing Writing of Chinese Picture,” about extreme Chinese native exclusionism, according to which, only the Chinese community of China has the right to represent our culture. Taiwan scholar Dexing Shan, who is cited in both Zhiyan Fang and Xiujuan Yu’s works, shows similar concerns. He advocates a humble attitude, rejects cultural authoritarianism, and suggests that, after all, these American born writers have been raised in an English-speaking US American environment, surrounded by mainstream conceptions of minority groups and non-Western cultures. Indeed, Zhiyan Fang’s warning and Dexing Shan’s concern indicate a significant issue in Chinese history and the current political environment in China. The changes of different dynasties, the rise and fall of central regimes and divisions, and unifications of the country, have created many cultural and political debates about the legitimacy of certain governments. Such debates still exist in Chinese speaking regions. For instance, between simplified Chinese characters and traditional Chinese characters, there are debates about which system is more correct and suitable. Between different dialects, there are arguments about which dialect is closer to the ancient Han language. Among different ethnic and political groups, there are distinct opinions on how to define the concept of “Chinese.” Consequently, it may be inappropriate, from my point of view, to curtly define some Chinese American writers’ writing as “real” or “fake” in the presence of such ambiguities.

### 1.3. The Structure of This Thesis

I consider Tan's fictional writing of the experience of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American born daughters to be an experiment in cross-cultural communication. Such communication may be highly personal and subjective to Tan, who claims to write so that her mother can understand her feelings and to remember what she has learned from her Chinese side. I also believe that her writings create an opportunity for bi- (or cross-) cultural communication and it matches the concept of harmony in Chinese traditional philosophy. In addition, I agree with Jianjun Zou's opinion that Tan's works and the theme of reconciliation should be viewed as a whole. However, in contradistinction to his argument that *The Joy Luck Club* is the outline of all of Tan's novels, I regard this work as the beginning of a development, in which we can find transformation from comparatively simplistic depictions of the Chinese community to some multi-dimensional portrayals of Chinese and Chinese American characters. Meanwhile, *The Joy Luck Club* also has some elements that are not as outstanding in Tan's other works as they are in this work, such as the cooperation and competition among Chinese immigrant mothers.

In Chapter 2, "Reconciliation: Cooking a Bowl of *Her* Soup," I will introduce the traditional Chinese concept of harmony/reconciliation and analyze why I believe Tan's works induce a process of cultural communication and reconciliation through translation, which in the case of Amy Tan studies is within and beyond the boundaries of fiction of Tan's original English texts. That is to say, translation does not only happen within Tan's fictional mother-daughter narrative. In addition, the 1993 film

adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club* and the debatable Chinese translation of Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* are also examples in my analysis of translation as one significant strategy to achieve reconciliation. Apart from the concept of harmony/reconciliation, Lawrence Venuti's theory about three kinds of translation: "intralingual," "interlingual," and "intersemiotic" will be relied on as well.

Chapter 3, "Airing the Kitchen God's Dirty Laundry" focuses on the issue of whether Tan's portrayal of Chinese men should be reviewed as reinforcement of Western stereotypes. In my opinion, Tan's works contain both stereotypical writing of Chinese men and counter-images, and it is necessary to mark the eventual reconciliation between Chinese men and women in her *Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. To analyze this point, I will compare Tan's different portrayals of Chinese men in her several novels. *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* are my focuses because I consider the representation of Chinese men in these two books symbolizes the stereotypical writing and counter-images respectively in Tan's works. At the same time, Frank Chin's notion about the "real" and the "fake" will be analyzed further, along with discussions of the modification of Chinese mythologies in Chinese American literature.

The discussion in Chapter 4, "A Portrait of Chinese Mothers," targets Tan's depiction of the Chinese mother characters and the reconciliation among matrilineal generations, which have been troubled by both the intercultural and intergenerational conflicts. The cultural differences between China and the United States are influential, but there are also effects from intergenerational issues such as the daughter's complex

feelings toward her mother. My studies of the reconciliation among generations will begin with the conflicts between the mothers and the daughters, and the otherness of the Chinese mothers. The ways to achieve the reconciliation among generations in Tan's texts, in my mind, are by the daughters' linguistic approach to the mothers, and by subjectivation of the mothers, which are related to the historical background and debate about the representation of history.

Furthermore, these chapters are partly overlapping as well. The discussion of the Chinese mythology will appear in all three chapters. While the language issue takes up a large part of Chapter 2, Chapter 4 also involves the discussion of problems related to language. Moreover, both of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 are related to the traditional Chinese family values. Compared to Chapter 3, which focuses on the representation of Chinese men (husband/father), Chapter 4 is about the representation of Chinese mothers (mother surrogates such as aunties and older sisters, and grandmothers.) It also needs to be noted that this thesis also echoes some criticism of Tan's writings and although I suggest that Tan's works need to be viewed as a whole, I am not saying there are no faults in them. After all, the reconciliation requires time to process.

## Chapter 2 Search for Reconciliation through Translation: Cooking a Bowl of *Her* Soup

### 2.1. The Meaning of *Her* Soup

This chapter focuses on the reconciliation which is practised through the strategies of translation, not only by Tan but also by artists whose works are related to Tan's, for example, Jun Cai and Wayne Wong. As I have introduced in Chapter 1, Chinese scholar Jianjun Zou's use of “和”, the traditional Chinese philosophical concept indicating the meaning of harmony/reconciliation, is the inspiration for this thesis and this chapter, which is representative of the conception of the Chinese reconciliation.

The name of this chapter is also a production of reconciliation because the word *Her* is part Chinese and part English. The English word “harmony” is officially spelt as “*He*” in mainland China's Pinyin system. However, the pronunciation of *He* sounds more like “her” in English to me. Therefore, in this chapter, I have decided to play on the sound of the Chinese word “*He*” and have represented it as “*Her*” (harmony) in order to suggest and strengthen the female dimension of “harmony” in my analysis of Tan's work.

In Chinese history, many scholars and schools of philosophy embrace the concept of harmony. Although their opinions vary, there are still common areas of agreement among them. Firstly, harmony can only be generated through the process of organized co-operation among different elements, or varied forces within the



universe, nature and society. The most notable example of this theory is the concept of “Yin-Yang,” according to the principles of which, the world and everything in it simultaneously contain both Yin and Yang elements. Harmony is created by the balance between these two conflicting and also co-existing extremes. Chaos and disaster, on the other hand, occur when the balance between Yin and Yang is broken. When the ancient kingdom of Western Zhou (1046 – 771 BC) was stricken by a massive earthquake during King You’s regime (795 – 771 BC), historian Bo Yang Fu utilized the idea of “Yin-Yang” to analyze this incident. According to historical records, he was the first scholar to employ the “Yin-Yang” notion to connect reasons of natural disaster to harmony. From his point of view, this earthquake was a result of the loss of harmony between Yin and Yang. Lau Tzu, a well-known Yin-Yang advocate and founder of Taoism, indicates that harmony is the impetus of the birth and production of new objects and living creatures, and it can only be generated between the forces of Yin and Yang, which are constantly moving and changing. Apart from Yin and Yang, other elements are also considered as parts necessary to create harmony by other scholars such as Yi He, in whose conception, everything is created by six different kinds of weather phenomena: Yin, Yang, wind, rain, darkness, brightness, and five elements: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth (Dong 50).

Secondly, harmony and assimilation, in traditional Chinese philosophy, are two completely different concepts. Historian Shi Bo of the Western Zhou Dynasty insists that assimilation and absolute unification, which are opposite to harmony, can only upset balance, destroy stability, and terminate development, and, to achieve these

requirements, diversity is a vital precondition. Ideologist and scholar-bureaucrat Yan Ying, who served Duke Qi during the Spring and Autumn Period (770 – 476BC), uses the cuisine of soup as an example to explain the importance of diversity and the harm brought by purity. He suggests that harmony is like a bowl of fish soup. It is a product of co-operation of several different elements: water, fire, vinegar, sauce, salt, plum, fish, and the cook's efforts and skills. There is no way people can make delicious soup if they only put pure water into the pot. Another example used by Yan Ying to explain the importance of diversity is music. No one could ever enjoy a song that only has one single note. Without changes, cadence, rhyme, comparisons between the high and low notes, one would just have a boring and even painful noise rather than wonderful songs, which, he claims, have the power to appease people's anger, anxiety, and other negative emotions as well as to improve their morality. Regarding politics, he argues that constant and complete agreement between the monarch and his ministers are unhealthy for a country. The former must listen to different voices before making decisions on political issues and rationally consider those opinions that may be totally opposite to his intimate thoughts.

Among many scholars who advocate the concepts of harmony, Confucius is certainly one of the most remarkable. According to Jianjun Zou, one of the famous sayings from *the Analects of Confucius* is: "A gentleman unites with people of principle and never follows others blindly. A petty man follows others blindly without regard to principle," represents Confucius' opinion on the concept of harmony (25). Even if Confucius is loathed for making "everyone look down on someone else,

women were the lowest” (Tan, *Kitchen God*, 103) by one of Tan’s protagonists Winnie, who is also a fictional surrogate of Tan’s mother Daisy Tan, it is still necessary to introduce Confucian harmony in this thesis because of Confucius’ predominant status in the history of traditional Chinese philosophy. As an important part of the *Zhong-He* 中-和 (moderatism-harmony) dyad, which is considered the first survival skill for Chinese people, even in the modern world by some Chinese scholars such as Genhong Dong, the Confucian harmony is rooted in the Chinese blood lineage system, along with other significant notions such as 仁/*Ren* (benevolence) and 礼/*Li* (rites). After being influenced by Taoism, the school of legalism, Buddhism, and other philosophies, Confucius’ intellectual successors extended the theory of Confucian harmony to the level of “heaven-human.” It can only be achieved on the precondition that every individual, including the monarch, always knows and stays in their proper place in Chinese society and in their families, and under the guidance of *Li*. It also represents an ideally peaceful state of traditional Chinese society and family. Meanwhile, it can assist the monarch to maintain a stable operation of Chinese patriarchal feudal society, which resembles a nation-wide extended family, with the monarch as the alpha father figure and every social member as his metaphorical sons and daughters. Although several intellectual reforms since then, such as the May Fourth New Culture Movement of 1919, have considerably weakened Confucianism in China, the Confucian harmony still has an effect on Chinese people’s reaction to the world (Dong 1).

From my point of view, the search for reconciliation between two different

types of cultural system is also a crucial part of life for Tan. As the daughter of a Chinese American father, who was raised in a Christian environment, and a Chinese immigrant mother, Tan often finds herself stuck in the middle of two cultures, languages, generations, beliefs, and, sometimes, between the worlds of the living and the dead because of her parents' strong belief in spirits. For instance, as she writes in her book *The Opposite of Fate*,

[I]n my family, there were two pillars of beliefs: Christian faith on my father's side, Chinese fate on my mother's. Picture these two ideologies as you might the goalposts of a soccer field, faith at one end, fate at the other, and me running between them trying to duck whatever dangerous missile had been launched in the air (11).

From Tan's narration, we can learn that there were always two kinds of ghosts in her childhood: the Holy Ghost, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Chinese ghosts from her mother's past. When still a young girl, she was educated by her father in Christian beliefs, and was asked to play a psychic for her mother, sitting in front of an Ouija board with her fingers on a planchette, and trying to communicate with her long departed suicidal grandmother, or recently perished father and brother (25-26). In her fiction writing, this supernatural communication, which I see as another kind of search for reconciliation, becomes one main theme in Tan's novels. For example, in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the protagonist Ruth, whose first name is the same as Tan's middle name, experiences similar kinds of supernatural activities in her young age. Because her mother LuLing believes she can communicate with her grandmother

Precious Auntie, who has also committed suicide, Ruth has to write down the imaginary Precious Auntie's answers for her mother in a sand tray with a chopstick. Apart from Ruth's and LuLing's story, supernatural experiences also feature in Tan's other mother-daughter narratives as another dimension to inter-generational reconciliation, which is one of the three kinds of reconciliation I will discuss in the following chapters.

## **2.2. *Her* and Translation**

Translation in various forms, from my point of view, is an important and common strategy practised in the communication and interaction between different cultures, even if the result of translation may not always be positive in overcoming obstacles created by differences and then being able to achieve reconciliation, to bring about *Her*. In this chapter, I will draw upon Ken-fang Lee's analysis in his "Cultural Translation and the Exorcist: A Reading of Kingston's and Tan's Ghost Stories" and Roman Jakobson's theories of three translation methods to discuss the translation activities in and beyond Tan's novels. In addition, the motion picture adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club* and the Chinese translation version of *Saving Fish from Drowning* will be included in my analysis.

I regard translation as a suitable instrument to create a bridge among different groups of people, who are classified by various languages and cultures. It provides possibilities for *Her* and its importance in the contemporary world has been raised

with the increase in international communication. As Sherry Simon points out, “the globalization of culture means that we all live in ‘translated’ worlds” (qtd. in Lee 105). In Tan’s novels, language differences and the use of language result in misunderstandings and emotional obstacles, and enlarge intergenerational gaps which bring disasters to their life and relations with other family members. Translation, on the other hand creates an opportunity to surpass the intergenerational and intercultural conflicts. It plays a significant role in Tan’s mother-daughter narrative and does not only include “literal transformation but also cultural and psychological interaction,” according to Lee (115).

Furthermore, the femininity within the activity of translation makes the practice of translation theories more suitable in this study of a Chinese American female writer and related to the word *Her*, which stands for “harmony” and contains a feminine tendency. In Lee’s article, he suggests that the activity of translation is traditionally related to femininity, since for quite a long time in literary history, most translators have been female and translation is an acceptable way for women to participate in the male centered literary hierarchy. Compared to original texts, translated works are always considered secondary, exactly as women are to men under the rule of patriarchal power (106). From my point of view, translated works are to the original texts as minority cultures are to mainstream culture in a multicultural society, and as the “inferior” and feminized East is to the “superior” and masculine West.

The Chinese American community is an embodiment of translation. On the correlation between cultural identity and translation, Lee refers to Homi Bhabha’s

notion of “the third space”, to explain the meaning of being “Chinese American.” Bhabha believes that translation occurs in “the third space” and ensures that “the meaning and symbols” of culture have no “primordial unity or fixity.” Based on this theory, Lee indicates that “the dehyphenated identity, the Chinese American, takes the place of neither/nor as well as of both/and at once. It is more like a third space in which they are caught in-between,” says Lee (106).

The influence of this ambiguous identity on Chinese American literature, and, in this project’s context, on Tan’s works, constitutes a process of “defamiliarization” (Lee 106). By translating unacquainted Chinese elements into an Anglophone context and weaving them with American elements, Tan’s novels emphasize a cultural hybridity which stands against absolute assimilation into the dominant culture. Her fiction displays one kind of reconciliation in the diversity and resembles the conception of “her.”

Allan Turner also mentions “defamiliarization” in his theory on translation and argues that “the work of the translator may be compared to that of the musical arranger who writes a piece for a different instrument or group of instruments” (168). To him, the process of translation is similar to the process of creating simpler transcriptions of “the great classics” (169). The most remarkable example is Franz Liszt’s musical translation of Beethoven’s original *The Ninth Symphony*, which is notably complex and sometimes includes several motifs. When Liszt created the piano transcription for this masterpiece, he had to make a lot of choices in order to keep the essentials of *The Ninth Symphony* in its translation version and simultaneously ensure

the transcription was available for solo piano performance. As a product of Liszt's personal understanding of and insight into Beethoven's original work, this translation version is undoubtedly subjective. It reveals Liszt's perspective towards what Beethoven was doing and his results from this research may be too difficult for others to notice. Turner uses "defamiliarization" to define musical transcription and suggests that a literature translation follows a similar process. A translator, in front of a "complex and polyphonic" work of literature, is just like a musical arranger. He/she has to decide which part of the original text is necessary in the translated version. No matter what his/her choices are, the translated version of the original text always reveals his/her thoughts on the author's intentions, apparent or hidden to other readers. Apart from Turner, other scholars also use metaphors for translators. For example, George Steiner considers a translator an aggressor, who "kidnaps the neighboring tribe's wives." In Francis Jones's description, a translator is more like an "ambassador" mediating between nations and representing the "interests of his or her own country (the source text), but in a manner consonant with the understanding and outlook of the host country (the target culture)" (Turner 168). In conclusion, the process of translation cannot avoid a certain amount of rewriting from the translator's point of view, which may be different to other people's understanding of the original work and unfamiliar to the receivers of the translated version.

Encouraged by Ken-feng Lee's analysis, Turner's ideas, and the notions from Steiner and Jones, I associate translation with the notion of localization or personalization of cuisine. Translation is like a process of cooking a certain sort of



dish, but how it is made in one region may be turned into something totally different in another to suit local tastes, so that all it has in common with the original dish is the name. For instance, a famous Chinese Sichuan dish, Mapo tofu, has various versions. And in some of those versions, people may not be able to find any Sichuan peppers or a trace of spicy bean curd because many people, including a large number of Chinese, cannot abide the strong taste of the original version. However, no matter how different from the original the so-called modified Mapo tofu dishes are, they are still different and alien compared to local foods. Thus, if the original recipe of a certain dish can be considered the original text, the localized adaptation of this recipe is a translated version. The translators' personal intentions in making these changes to the original vary, but the process of translation still objectively creates opportunities for interactions among cultures.

## **2.3. Three Types of Translation**

The following analysis of translation issues in relation to Tan's five novels in this section, is based on Roman Jakobson's theory of three types of translation as stated in his article, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation": "(1) Intralingual translation or 'rewording': an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language; (2) Interlingual translation or 'translation proper': an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language; (3) Intersemiotic translation or 'transmutation': an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of

nonverbal sign systems”(114).

### 2.3.1. The Intralingual Translation

It is difficult to find representative examples directly from Tan’s works to fit into this category of translation. In my opinion, the two Chinese translated versions of Tan’s fifth novel, *Saving Fish from Drowning*, which is renamed and known as *Chenmo Zhi Yu* in China, can be regarded as exceptions. Tan’s original English text has been translated twice into the Chinese language, according to the prologue of this Chinese version. The first translated draft is said to be a verbatim translation by an anonymous translator, or a group of anonymous translators. The second draft, the published version is actually a rewrite of the first version, by a Chinese thriller and science fiction writer, Jun Cai, whose name follows a unique (or I shall say a newly invented) Chinese term – “Yi Xie,” on the cover of *Chenmo Zhi Yu*. Literally, this term means “translating writing,” which includes both translation and rewriting of the original work by the translator(s). When I was creating a reference list for this thesis, I was initially confused about how to define *Chenmo Zhi Yu*’s author(s) and translator(s). Strictly speaking, the plot of the story in this translated version does not solely belong to Amy Tan anymore and the book actually becomes a co-authored product. Cai claims that the reason he made such massive changes is that the style of the initial translated draft was unsuited to Chinese speakers’ reading habits. Apart from linguistic editing, he also cut down some “lengthy” parts, and rearranged and

renamed the original chapters. Overall, he insists that he has tried his best to make this *Chenmo Zhi Yu*, which sounds more like “sinking fish” instead of “saving fish from drowning,” more attractive to Chinese readers.

Numerous careless mistakes can be found in the writing of *Chenmo Zhi Yu*. For example, the name of Steven King’s *Misery*, which is an important item in the story, has several different Chinese names, and one of them even mistakenly includes the author’s name in the book title and actually stands for *Stephen King’s Misery* instead of *Misery*. The English word “mine” in Tan’s original version only stands for one type of weapon. However, in different sections of *Chenmo Zhi Yu*, “mine” is translated into “Di Lei” (one type of weapon) and “Kuang Jing” (excavations for extracting natural resources.) The story in *Saving Fish from Drowning* is about the dramatic experience of a group of American tourists in China and Myanmar. The turning point of their destiny occurs when one of the leading characters, Harry Bailey, accidentally pees on a holy stone carving, whose name is transliterated as “Ayangbai” in Mandarin Chinese. This sanctified art work in Stone Bell/*Shi Zhong* Temple, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, is a unique vulva worship symbol in Chinese Buddhism grotto art history, and a product of the matrilineal worship culture of Bai, the dominant ethnic group in the Dali region. Differently from China’s mainstream Han culture, in which heaven is considered a symbol of patriarchal power, Bais correlate the heaven with matriarchal power. It is common for a man to marry into a woman’s family and not humiliating at all for Bais. This superior social status of females in Bai society results in the special vulva worship in

their stone carving art (Lu). But in *Chenmo Zhi Yu*, the vulva is mysteriously replaced by “womb hole” for no apparent reason. After some wild guessing, I think the reasons for this mistake perhaps are that: (1) the vulva and womb are both parts of female genital system and make no difference to the initial translator(s) or Cai; and (2) the womb sounds better than the vulva for some unexplained reasons. However, because I do not have access to the original translation draft, which in Cai’s prologue is described as an accurate representation of Tan’s English text, it is impossible to do a detailed comparison between this first translated version and Cai’s intralingual translation to know who is accountable for these mistakes.

## **2.3.2. Interlingual Translation**

### **2.3.2.1. The Case of “Sinking Fish”**

The search for *Her* through literary translation is a journey accompanied by struggles. *Chenmo Zhi Yu*, the Chinese version of Tan’s *Saving Fish from Drowning* is a hybrid, composed by Amy Tan, translated by one or more translator(s), and further translated and reworked by Jun Cai. It aroused wide dispute in China, when it was also an experiment to test what kind of combination of different elements could finally reduce conflicts, increase communication, and then achieve reconciliation among diversified forces. The responses to *Chenmo Zhi Yu* were both negative and positive. Some insiders in the publication industry pointed out that Cai’s “translating writing” was a copyright violation and a deceptive commercial promotion using Cai’s

fame as a Chinese contemporary thriller writer. Angry netizens also blamed Cai for his creative rewriting and argued that he had no right to decide which part of Tan's original English text was "lengthy" for Chinese readers (Shu). Lawyer Ping Bao believes that there is a clear boundary between translation and rewriting. To practise a "translating writing", it is necessary to get permission from the original author, otherwise it is an infringement of copyright. Even if the "rewriting" version has been authorized by the publishing company and does not really concern Amy Tan, Chinese readers' consumer rights are still violated (Ren). Overall, it seems likely that no matter how much investment Cai claims he has in Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning*, the objectors can not tolerate the result of his good intentions.

My first reaction to *Chenmo Zhi Yu* will be categorized into the "What-on-earth-is-this?" type. And my initial purpose of putting the case of "sinking fish" into this project was to criticize Cai's work. Nevertheless, frankly speaking, despite the careless mistakes and his subjective view of Chinese readers' reading habits, some parts of Cai's "translating rewriting" of Tan's *Saving Fish from Sinking* are acceptable and even thoughtful. For example, replacing Myanmar with a fictional country "Lan Na Kingdom" can be attributed to the concern of the publication censorship in China (Ren). According to Wyatt's *Thailand*, the real "Lan Na Kingdom" was founded by King Mangrai, who was born on 23rd October, 1239. The capital city of this ancient country is located in Chiang Mai, an important city in the northern part of what is today Thailand. The fictional "Lan Na Kingdom" in *Chenmo Zhi Yu* directly borders China's Yunnan province and is also ruled by a royal family. In

order to avoid the Burma narrative, Cai cancels the American tourists' bus trip from Lijiang to Ruili and sends them to Lijiang airport, which is turned into an international port, and then sends them off by airplane. Names of locations and ethnic groups in Myanmar are also replaced by fictional names. The protagonist Bibi Chen's long comments and insights on Myanmar's history and current situation are completely wiped out along with Ruili.

In contrast to Cai's critics, Tan's response to the "translating writing" version of her novel is positive. In an interview with a Chinese media institution, *The Southern Weekend* in 2006, she indicates that she basically agrees with the publisher's decision on the "translating rewriting." She has heard about Cai's fame in China and is glad he can be the rewriter of her fifth novel, even though she cannot tolerate a word of her original English texts being rewritten when they were published in the United States and in the English language. She also points out that the best way of dealing with the problems of translation is when a writer is a master of multiple languages and capable of writing in two languages simultaneously. Since she does not have such multi-linguistic writing skills, she is happy that her work can be published in China and that her Chinese relatives can read it. In addition to Tan, Xunhuan Li, the publisher of *Chenmo Zhi Yu*, is also a supporter of Cai. He argues that the "translating writing" starts a new form of localizing foreign literature by translation. "How many readers can fully understand the meaning in the Chinese version and the English version at the same time?" asks Xunhuan Li, who also argues that "people think this [translating writing] is unreasonable, because they don't analyze the situation from the

fact and result.” And by “result”, I believe he means that the Chinesenized *Saving Fish from Drowning* gets a much better printing quota than the Chinese translated versions of Tan’s earlier novels because of Jun Cai’s involvement (Yin Zhang). With regard to the translated works of Chinese literature in other countries, he indicates: “I notice that there are also many deletions which have been done to Chinese works, when they are introduced to non-Chinese speaking overseas readers. The blame [on Cai] is just a consequence of ignorance and narrow mind” (Shu).

### **2.3.2.2. The Power of Translation of Written Text**

Tan’s American born daughter characters and the younger sister in *Hundred Secret Senses* often inherit their Chinese memory from their mothers’/older sisters’ talk-story, an oral tradition, which is weaker than written texts and an unsteady form to create “multiple levels of misunderstanding”, according to Dunick. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Suyuan’s failure to convince Jing-Mei to listen to her tragic past and then fully understand her good intentions, proves that the communication difficulties brought about by faulty oral translation can widen intercultural and intergenerational gaps. Kwan’s many supernatural stories that she wants to tell her half-sister Olivia in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, encounter similar problems. As Dunick says: “Throughout Tan’s novels, these failed attempts at communication are in part produced by tension between persons who have different understandings of how stories, culture, and language are supposed to work” (6). Although the importance of talk-story should not

be ignored, this form of information exchange is still seriously limited as an interaction tool between native Chinese speakers and native English speakers or among Chinese with different dialects. For instance, Lindo not only has trouble in making her daughter Waverly understand the difference between “Taiyuan” and “Taiwan,” but also has problems in communicating with her Chinese American husband in the Chinese language before she acquires the ability to speak Cantonese. In her early years as a Chinese immigrant, the methods she can use to talk to her future husband are simple English words they both have learnt from English classes and pieces of paper with Chinese characters on. When she finally decides to marry she has to drop hints about her desire for marriage by giving him a piece of cookie packaging paper with a sentence on it: “A house is not a home when a spouse is not at home” (Tan, *Joy Luck*, 264).

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the written text successfully breaks the cultural and language obstacles and builds up a bridge between the mothers and daughters. LuLing, the Chinese immigrant mother, learns the truth of her family from the script of her mother's Precious Auntie after the latter commits a shocking suicide when she is still a teenager. Several decades later, when she notices that she is losing her memory owing to Alzheimers disease, she begins to write down her own life experiences in order to pass on her memory and hopes to her daughter Ruth, with whom she has feuded for years. In spite of their trouble communicating with each other and their serious fights, they still love and care for each other. Unlike other mother-daughter or sister relationships in Tan's other novels, their final reconciliation



relies on LuLing's written text which, in Dunick's words, is "the conscious and deliberate act of preserving and communicating specifically select messages" (268). This is contrary to talk-stories, which are "an unthinking act of recording immediate thought" and only useful in limited situations. It makes Tan's works different from Maxine Hong Kingston's and provides Chinese women with an opportunity to authentically express the complexity of their emotion and experience in a more rational way. It lets an individual as edgy as LuLing be able to manifest an unseen side of her personality through her writings. When the translator of LuLing's script, Mr. Tang calls Ruth and asks if he can have a meeting with LuLing, whom he has already considered an old friend, Ruth warns him: "She won't be the same woman who wrote those pages." But Mr. Tang answers, "[p]erhaps ... but somehow I think she will be" (Tan, *Bonesetter*, 268). LuLing's case highlights Chinese and Chinese immigrant women's literacy, which is frequently ignored by critics. It also reveals Tan's wish to give Chinese immigrants whose English is limited a chance to speak and tell their unknown stories that shape them into what they are today. Tan is an American writer who translates Chinese and Chinese American culture for her non-Chinese readers. Her works appeal for more critical recognition of and academic attention to Chinese American women's literacy, which is frequently absent in the public's understanding of the Chinese community.

### 2.3.2.3. *Her* Language and the Subsequent “Airing Dirty Laundry” Problems

Interlingual translation is the most active type of translation within and beyond Tan’s texts because of the multi-cultural environment that requires interactions among different languages. The non-English speaking readers’ access to Tan’s works is based on the translations of these novels. Similarly, Ruth’s chance of fully understanding LuLing and her tragic family history is a result of Mr. Tang’s passionate work on LuLing’s script. If every language is “a system of sounds, words, patterns, et cetera, used by humans to communicate thoughts and feelings,”<sup>5</sup> the translation brings this communication of thoughts and feelings to a level that is beyond the boundaries caused by language differences.

It is worth noting that Tan’s texts comprise Standard English and a hybrid language that can be regarded as Chinglish, which is a literal English translation of Chinese terms and idioms such as “monkey business” in Ruth Jordan Hsu’s story and the name of the eleventh chapter in *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, “Four Splits, Five Cracks.” Tan calls Chinglish her “mother tongue” and utilizes it to narrate the early life of her Chinese immigrant mother characters in China. This special language, which used to be shameful to Tan and limited the quality of what Daisy tried to tell her, has now helped “shape the way [she] saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world” (Tan, “Mother Tongue”, 7). It is Chinese immigrant mothers’ and many other Chinese characters’ common language. It is a cultural identity, representing the

<sup>5</sup>. “Language.” *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*.

Chineseness that has been partly reshaped by American culture. Moreover, according to Lawrence Venuti's notion of "resistant translation," it is a "resistant translation," that denies the attempt of "fluent translation" of repressing or eradicating "the contradictions and discrepancies between languages and cultures." It strikes "the dominance of cultural hegemony over minority discourses" brought by "fluent translation" (qtd. in Lee 123).

However, to other scholars such as Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, when this "limited English", also known as "Pidgin English," is utilized to narrate the Chinese mothers' memory of their mother country, it orientalizes "Chineseness," in spite of Tan's intention is to give voice to the Chinese immigrant mothers. Wong comments that, in American popular culture, the "short, choppy sentences" are "oft-used conventions whereby Chinese are recognized as 'Other'," and the "subtle, minute dislocations of English syntax and vocabulary jolting the language out of whack" can create an impression of translation from the Chinese even though no translation has taken place. For example, in one of *The Joy Luck Club* mother's stories *The Moon Lady*, when an old Chinese woman complains about her swollen foot in Chinese, the English form in Tan's text is: "Both inside and outside have a sour painful feeling." Referring to Elaine H. Kim, Wong argues that, in this Chinese speaking situation, the use of the "comic pidginized Asian English", which is found in Anglo-American writing on Asians, is unnecessary and a sign of orientalizing Asians, or, more specifically, the Chinese in Tan's case (188-189).

On the one hand, I have to admit that a highly limited use of "Chinglish" or

“Pidgin English” words has the capacity to articulate minority voices and challenge the dominance and assimilation pressures of mainstream culture. This is a *Her* language which displays the diversity of a multicultural society. But a great many of “Chinglish” sentences in one discourse and an overuse of this limited English form can only lead to more misunderstandings, confusion, and even reinforcement of stereotypes of Chinese in American popular culture, in both real life and in Tan’s novels. For instance, Tan’s mother’s, Daisy Tan’s, English is often misleading and confusing to others. Another example of this is in *The Joy Luck Club*, when Waverly shouts to her white American boyfriend Rich, “You don’t understand. You don’t understand my mother.” over Lindo’s reaction after their last family gathering. He shakes his head and answers, “Whew! You can say that again. Her English was so bad. You know, when she was talking about that dead guy showing up on *Dynasty*, I thought she was talking about something that happened in China a long time ago” (Tan, *Joy Luck*, 179.) In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Ruth complains several times that her mother, LuLing, who even has difficulties in pronouncing Ruth’s name correctly, has problems learning English. In Ruth’s opinion, LuLing’s poor English is the reason she often gets into fights with others and cannot get decent service in banks, stores and hospitals.

On the other hand, I also disagree with one of Wong’s accusations about the Pidgin English style Tan employs in her novels. While Wong’s suggestion that no translation takes place every time a Chinese character in the mothers’ narrative delivers a line in *The Joy Luck Club*, I believe that that is precisely what is happening

because the Chinese narratives in Tan's first three books are told by the mothers/elder sister and the listeners of their stories are the American daughters/younger sister. My problem with the Pidgin English writing style lies with LuLing's script, which is translated into Standard English by Mr. Tang. I hoped for a different kind of Chinese story from that formal translated version and a transformation of the portrayal of Chinese women's language ability, but the dialogues are still in Pidgin English.

### **2.3.3. Intersemiotic Translation**

The movie version of *The Joy Luck Club* fits perfectly well into intersemiotic translation. Produced by Oliver Stone and directed by Wayne Wang, this Chinese American oriented movie was released in 1993. The screenplay was written by Ron Bass, Wayne Wang, and Tan, who also appears in the opening scene as an extra, and it is obviously different from Tan's original text in many aspects. Among all of the changes, Xiaohui Chen argues that the most outstanding difference between the movie and the book is the replacement of the female centered theme with the Chinese American community (185). This major shift, from Chen's point of view, is attributed to some factors in the director, Wayne Wang's, personal background, notably his gender. Tan's essay "Joy Luck and Hollywood" proves that Wang's role as director was crucial in the final decision over what the movie would look like, although Bass and Tan had participated in the writing of the screen play. Probably, it is Wayne Wang, and maybe also Ron Bass's male perspective that weakens the femininity tendency in

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the book and transfers *The Joy Luck Club* from a feminine fictional narrative into a Chinese American story for the whole Chinese American community, not just for females.

Chen suggests this transformation is based on three major changes. First, Chinese mythological elements are rearranged in the plot. The Moon Lady's myth and Ying-ying's childhood experience and her prayer to the Moon Lady are deleted. Thus, the strong feminine implication, which is core to the book but not suitable for a movie aimed at an audience beyond Chinese immigrant women, is at the same time, denied, along with the part of the Moon Lady being played by a male actor, representing male domination over women in Chinese society. In Chinese mythology, the Moon Lady does not have the capacity to bless and protect females. On the contrary, her image is more associated with a spoilt and ungrateful young woman rather than a caring maternal figure like Kwan Yin. Although other myths in Tan's novels that Wang keeps in his movie have obvious differences from their Chinese origin, Chen believes their tone is comparatively neutral and they can fit into this movie targeting an audience beyond women, unlike the modified myth of the Moon Lady. For example, the folklore about using an obedient daughter's flesh and blood to create a powerful medicine to save her dying mother is different from the original also. In Chinese history, only the loyal subordinates, who are normally male, would cut their own flesh to cook a soup when their sovereign is starving. However, because this story vividly expresses filial piety, one of the absolutely crucial concepts in traditional Chinese morality, Chen believes that it is helpful to keep this story in the film to highlight the

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essence of Chinese culture.

The second major difference is the function of the Joy Luck Club. In the original text, the Joy Luck Club creates a comparatively private space for Chinese immigrant women to freely express their feelings in their native tongue. It is a place for them to temporarily escape from the family burdens they have to bear every day, the world of the dominant culture and the dual patriarchal oppression of white and Chinese men. In contrast, the Joy Luck Club in the film is not a restricted gathering anymore. Instead, it is a fun party for men and women in the Chinese American community. From the outside of the film, following the movement of the camera, the audience can see the Joy Luck Club gathering is no longer just about the mothers secretly chatting. Both men and women are enjoying leisure time together, greeting each other, talking, or watching sports games on TV. The American daughter characters and their husbands/partners are also chatting and joking around, with their children by their side and some random non-Chinese minor characters appearing on the screen. This sequence about a peaceful party suggests that the Joy Luck Club is not “Chinese women only” any more. Another original function of the club as a Chinese speaking environment is changed accordingly with the presence of non-Chinese characters. And when the immigrant mothers begin to communicate with one another, we notice that their language is understandable even if imperfect English. Chinese words are only seldom used. For example, when An-Mei and Ying-ying scold Lindo for lying to June, only An-Mei uses one sentence “How could you?!” in Chinese and the rest of the conversation is in English. Consequently, the

linguistic problem, which is a significant issue in Tan's original text, is elided in the movie.

Third, if the opening scene gives the audience a more harmonious picture of the Chinese American community, the final scene with June crying and calling her mother with her half-sisters, enforces this tone further to the level of creating harmony between Chinese and Chinese Americans. In addition, all mother-daughter stories in the film have happy conclusions, unlike the uncertain and open endings in the book. Lindo and Waverly finally understand each other in a tearful laugh, after exchanging their feelings toward each other. In the book, when Lena hears the sound of the glass shattering and chair scraping across the wooden floor of the guest room, in which her visiting mother is staying, she goes to check her mother, before her narrative ends in an indirect implication:

And then I see my mother sitting by the open window, her dark silhouette against the night sky. She turns around in her chair, but I can't see her face.

"Fallen down," she says simply. She doesn't apologize.

"It doesn't matter," I say, and I start to pick up the broken glass shards.

"I knew it would happen."

"Then why you don't stop it?" asks my mother.

And it's such a simple question (165).

Ying-ying/Lena's part of story, in the film, finishes with a more dramatic interaction between the mother and daughter. Instead of indirect implication, Ying-ying asks Lena straight out, "Do you know what you want? ... I mean, from him [Harold]." When



Lena replies: "Respect. Tenderness", Ying-ying insists her daughter tell Howard now and leave his "lopsided house." She tells the crying Lena, "Losing him does not matter. It is you who will be found and cherished." At last, Ying-ying leaves Harold and gets a new family centred boyfriend, who is both respectful and caring. Rose Hsu Jordan, who used to have difficulties making decisions, gets a happy ending in the film as well. After her mother An-Mei tells the story about her suicidal grandmother, who "does not know her worth, until too late", she shouts her feelings and emotions out loud to Ted, makes him listen to her voice once again after these many years of silence, and finally regains his love. Suyuan, the founder of the Joy Luck Club, has passed away, both at the beginning of the film version and in the book. However, like other Chinese immigrant mothers, she is granted an opportunity to tell her daughter June directly: "I see you!" After a Chinese New Year Eve dinner with the Jongs, June believes she is "outsmarted" by Waverly and "betrayed" by her own mother Suyuan during the argument about June's work. When they have another fight in the kitchen, Suyuan gives June her jade pendant and firmly tells her, "I see you. That bad crab, only you tried to take it. Everybody else want best quality. You, you thinking different. Waverly took best-quality crab. You took worst. Because you have best quality heart. You have style no one can teach. Must be born this way. I see you." This same episode in the book comparatively ends in a more metaphorical and ambiguous way with less emotional conflict.

"What if someone else had picked that crab?"

My mother looked at me and smiled. "Only you pick that crab."

Nobody else take it. I ready know this. Everybody else want best quality. You think different.”

She said it in a way as if this were proof – proof of something good. She always said things that didn’t make any sense, that sounded both good and bad at the same time (208).

Apart from the meaning of the crab, June in the book version does not fully comprehend her mother’s intention of giving her the jade pendant.

I put the necklace on. It felt cool.

“Not so good, this jade,” she said matter-of-factly, touching the pendant, and then she added in Chinese: “This is young jade. It is a very light color now, but if you wear it every day it will become more green” (209).

Near the end of the film, June is awakened from her memory about her mother and every major character is ready to cheer her, instead of cooking in her parents’ kitchen for her father in the book. In Chen’s argument, the party scenes that are used in the conclusion of each character’s personal story symbolize a harmonious family that is the vital theme of the film version (199) and the core of Chinese culture and the subject of Confucius’s harmony notion, rather than the female oriented theme of the book.

Adding men’s perspective also contributes to this theme shifting from the book to the film, in Chen’s opinion. Although I do not see that the scene when Suyuan’s reunited daughters are being surrounded by male extras should be considered as an example of giving positive light to Chinese men as Chen does, I

agree that the portrayal of men in this film makes it different from the book. In Lena's case, her ex-husband Harold Livotny, whose exact racial identity is unclear in the book version, misses his family name in the film and is played by an Asian American actor; while her new boyfriend, who does not exist in the book at all, is also depicted as an Asian American. This arrangement, in my opinion, individualizes Lena's experience and turns it into a personal affair by showing both greedy and caring Asian American men simultaneously. June's father is a minor character in the plot, yet his appearance and the action of cooking dishes in the kitchen, which seems likely to be a "mothers only" place in the book, represents Chinese men's voice and caring side in the film version of the Joy Luck Club. As in the book, he is the one who transfers Suyuan's story, sorrow, pain, and regret to June. But in the film he also passes the swan feather, which does not actually exist as a real object in the book, to their daughter June for his wife Suyuan. He also tells June in the evening before she departs from the United States to China, "On the day you were born, she transfers all her hope to you, all hope from those babies." And "Mine too", at last, he adds a two word sentence that represents a Chinese father's good intentions for his daughter that have not been portrayed as clearly and as strongly in the film as in the book.

## 2.4. Conclusion

Reconciliation through translation surpasses the boundaries of languages and brings cultural communication within and beyond Tan's texts. For example, in Tan's fiction works and her real life, the "mother tongue" (also known as "limited English" or "Chinglish") is created when non-English speaking Chinese are trying to search for reconciliation between two different languages. By translation of the Chinese mothers' written text, Chinese women are given an opportunity to display their literacy and educational background in Tan's works. The 1993 film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club* is a production of reconciliation. It is co-worked by a staff team comprising people from different cultures and countries. In addition, it is composed through multiple working processes such as directing, music composing, and performing and so on, in addition to screenplay writing, which is different from the original novels.

Nevertheless, I have to acknowledge that this bowl of *Her* soup can be bitter as well. In other words, there is also a negative side of translation along with the positive side. For instance, the "mother tongue" of Tan is indeed one important element in stereotypes of Chinese, while it is also a production of reconciliation. Furthermore, by cutting out the troubles created by language barriers in the motion picture adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club*, this film counters the "can't-speak-English" stereotype. However, this feature also makes the film feel like an incomplete representation of Chinese immigrants. Living in an English speaking country, the language problem is a crucial issue for many non-native English speakers. It is true

that some of these non-native English speakers are talented and hardworking enough to master this language. There are still many immigrants such as the mothers/older sisters in Tan's novels and her own mother Daisy Tan, who are silenced or limited owing to the language barriers. Another example of the negative side of translation is the "translating writing" of Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning*. Personally, I find Jun Cai's *Chenmo Zhi Yu* ironic in the debate on the "real" and the "fake" in Chinese American literature criticism. When there are arguments about how Chinese myths shall be translated into English in the works of Chinese American writers and whether they shall be modified, there are discussions, in China, on how these works shall be translated back into the Chinese language. In conclusion, translation is an important strategy when searching for reconciliation between languages and cultures, while it is also dangerous to use and can create more problems in many situations.

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## Chapter 3 “Airing the Kitchen God’s Dirty Laundry”

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter aims at reconciliation between the two genders of the Chinese community within Tan’s fiction works. Even if I agree that Tan’s novels contain obvious description of misogynistic and abusive Chinese male characters that can be seen as typical examples of the stereotypes of Chinese men, I still have to point out that these five novels of Tan should not be simply categorized into a type of Orientalist writing. They should be, in my opinion, studied as a whole and seen as a development with changes instead. Apart from tragic marriages centered in the story of *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Tan’s mother narratives also contain harmonious relationships between Chinese men and women.

The name of this chapter is an allusion to Ishmael Reed’s book *Airing Dirty Laundry* and therefore I am suggesting a parallel between negative critical responses to African American women’s literary productions and to Chinese American women authors. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, Reed regards some black writers’ negative portrayals or “confessions” of the African American community’s internal social issues as “airing dirty laundry” writing that can then be utilized to reinforce harmful African American racist stereotypes promoted by American mainstream media. Compared to black women who are seen as victims of domestic violence by modern feminists, Reed believes black men are more endangered and vulnerable to the racist

attacks of white mainstream culture because they are not only bashed by the media, but also by African American writers who portray black men as absent father figures, wife beaters, drug dealers, robbers, and thieves. Similarly to Reed, Chinese American critics, especially male critics like Frank Chin, are concerned with the white mainstream media's portrayal of men in minority ethnic groups and are also irritated by writers from their own ethnic group describing the dark side of their community. Because of her negative portrayal of Chinese men in her first two novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Amy Tan was criticized by Chin and other critics for stereotyping the Chinese community, especially Chinese men. Chin even held up Tan as an example of "fake" Chinese American writers, along with Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Hwang. Although Chin does not use the term "Airing Dirty Laundry," his accusation of "fake Chinese writer" against Tan, reinforced in his article "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," and in a 1995 interview with Henry Hong, can be seen as a parallel to Reed's rejection of black writers who aired dirty laundry because, like Reed, Chin's major concern is the reinforcement of negative stereotypes of Chinese men. To understand why there has been concern that Tan's fiction might be seen as reinforcing and perpetuating negative stereotypes of Chinese men, it is important to provide a brief account of the encounter between whites and Chinese migrants in the nineteenth century and the origins of negative stereotypes at a time of intense xenophobia.

Chinese migrants' history in the United States began in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the first group of Chinese labourers arrived in California,

drawn by the gold rush and the hope of becoming rich in *Gam Saan* (“Gold Mountain”). As Takaki points out in *A Different Mirror*, they were mostly married men and sojourners, who had no plan to become long-term residents. Instead of “‘coolies’ – unfree labo[u]rers who had been kidnapped or pressed into service by coercion and shipped to foreign country,” these Chinese labourers were free workers (193). The following folk song might reveal the feelings of these early Chinese migrants:

In the second reign year of Haamfung [1852], a trip  
to Gold Mountain was made.

With a pillow on my shoulder, I began my perilous  
journey:

Sailing a boat with bamboo poles across the sea,

Leaving behind wife and sisters in search of money,

No longer lingering with the woman in the bedroom,

No longer paying respect to parents at home (193).

When these Chinese labourers arrived in the United States, there were some signs that they “were welcome in California,” says Takaki. The *Daily Alta California* even reported in 1852: “the China boys will yet vote at the same polls, study at the same schools and bow at the same altar as our own countrymen” (195). Three years later, Lai Chun-Chuen, a merchant of San Francisco, noticed that “the people of Flowery land [China] were received like guests,” and “greeted with favor. Each treated the other with politeness. From far and near we came and were pleased” (195). However,



it was the racist hatred and prejudices against the Chinese labourers that were dominant and outstanding. Two-thirds of them worked in California mines at first (194-95) and “[f]rom the gold fields of the Sierras came the nativist cry: ‘California for Americans,’” Takaki narrates. In 1850, “a foreign miners’ tax” aimed at Mexican miners was legislated (195). This law was quickly abolished, but the legislature soon enacted another foreign miners’ tax targeting Chinese miners, in 1852. According to this tax, every foreign miner who “did not desire to become a citizen” was to be charged three dollars for every month of his residence in the United States. Furthermore, for those who actually “desire” to apply for citizenship, there was a 1790 federal law keeping them from doing so, since this law forbade non-white persons from applying for citizenship. As a result, by the time this foreign miners’ tax law was repealed by the 1870 Civil Rights Act, the Californian government had collected five million dollars, “a sum presenting 25 to 50 percent of all state revenue,” from approximately twenty-four thousand Chinese miners, two-thirds of the Chinese population in the United States (195).

The mining profit had begun to decline in 1860s. In this situation, the majority of Chinese labourers gradually left the gold mines and were hired as wage-earners by Central Pacific Railroad to construct the transcontinental railroad. They were regarded as “quiet, peaceable, industrious, economical – ready and apt to learn all the different kinds of work,” by the company president Leland Stanford (196). The company superintendent Charles Croker reported that: “They [Chinese labourers] prove nearly equal to white men in the amount of labor they perform, and are much more reliable”

(197). When white workers protested the company's decision to hire more Chinese labourers, Crocker responded: "We can't get enough white labor to build this railroad, and build it we must, so we're forced to hire them [Chinese labourers]. If you can't get along with them, we have only one alternative. We'll let you go and hire nobody but them" (197). By 1869, the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad line was accomplished and Takaki sees it as "a Chinese achievement." After being released by the Central Pacific Railroad in 1869, thousands of Chinese labourers then went to San Francisco and were employed in four major industries – "boot and shoe, woolens, cigar and tobacco, and sewing" (198). Other Chinese workers went to work in agriculture as tenant farmers or labourers, contributing significantly to Californian agricultural development (199). Nevertheless, strong racist hatred from white labourers, especially at times of economic recession, gradually cast them out from these factories, fields, and other sections of the United States' economy because they were seen as threats to wage levels as they were willing to work for less wages than whites. In order to survive, they were forced to be self-employed or work for Chinese businesses, and take jobs such as restaurant cooks, waiters, and laundry workers. Of all of these limited occupations, laundry work was the most common because of its minimal requirements: "a stove, trough, dry room, sleeping apartment, a sign" (Takaki 201), and simple English words like "yes" and "no." Therefore, the total number of Chinese laundries rapidly increased nationwide in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. For instance, according to Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*, the number of Chicago's Chinese laundries increased from 209 to

704 during the years 1903 to 1928. In 1940, 38 percent of all gainfully employed Chinese in New York City were related laundry workers and there were Chinese laundries on almost every street corner (240). The rapid increase of Chinese laundries irrevocably linked Chinese men to laundries in the white American mind. In this racist imagination, the Chinese laundry men had a laughable foreign accent. They ate rats and chased white children with “red-hot irons.” They practised all kinds of “mysterious and sinister things in the back room of the laundry.” They also kidnapped “bad little boys” in bags and carried them to “unknown places.” They were “the neighborhood’s Fu Manchu, the spooky crook, the bad guy, associated with murder and the darkness of light” (241). In addition, because of cooking, waiting and laundry work being regarded as women’s work, Chinese men were not just portrayed as scary villains but also as feminized aliens, as the evil and perverted Dr. Fu Manchu. Even if there were the fictional detective, Charlie Chan, to prove that the stereotyped Chinese man was not always a villain, Chinese men were still regarded as feminine and as perverted as Fu Manchu.

During the Second World War, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was abolished as China became the United States’ ally against the Japanese Empire’s extension in the Asia-Pacific area. The stereotype of Chinese American men accordingly experienced several changes, transforming them into “friends” instead of a “peril”. “By the end of the war, Asian Americans had become “conditionally acceptable” in white mainstream society” (Kim 177). During the 1960s civil rights movement, Asian Americans were even held up as an example to American Blacks and other

“troublesome” minorities of how to behave appropriately and subserviently (178). In this context of racial politics in the 1960s, Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan suggest there are two models for each racial group, the unacceptable model and the acceptable model. “The unacceptable model is unacceptable because he cannot be controlled by whites. The acceptable model is acceptable because he is tractable.”(qtd. in “Warrior Woman.” Cheung. 309). Within these two models, there is racist hate and racist love, according to Chin and Chan. On the one hand, “racist hate” leads to the portrayal of masculine black men as violent maniacs and criminals in the mainstream media. On the other hand, stereotyped Chinese Americans became “a dutiful race of sissies...living to accommodate the whitemen” by “racist love” (qtd. in Kim 179). These two Chinese American writers also point out that “the model community” and “honorary whites” stereotypes brought the Chinese into conflict between Blacks and whites because “we’re hated by the blacks because the whites love us for being everything the blacks are not. Blacks are a problem: badass. Chinese Americans are not a problem: kissass” (qtd. in Kim 179).

Apart from feminization, another significant and unchanging feature of the stereotype of Chinese and Chinese American men is misogyny towards women, which leads to the production of overworked images of women abusing Chinese men and miserable Chinese female victims created by white racist writers. According to Chin and his co-editors of *Aiiieeeee*, these images satisfy an “old white Christian fantasy of little Chinese victims of ‘the original sin of being born to a brutish, sadomasochistic culture of cruelty and victimization’ fleeing to America in search of freedom from

everything Chinese and seeking white acceptance, and of being victimized by stupid white racists and then being reborn in acculturation and honorary whiteness” (Chan et al, *The Big Aiiieeeee* xii). Furthermore, these images are not only promoted by white writers, but also by some Chinese American writers, who in Chin’s eyes have been trained in a racist environment to accept this stereotyping and engage in self-contempt for their own race. This group of “fake” Chinese American writers, including Tan, is regarded, then, as reinforcing negative Chinese images in white American popular culture and their crime was particularly egregious when they used autobiographical forms of writing.

Reading through Tan’s novels, it is not difficult to find stereotypes of Chinese men which have incurred stern criticism from Chinese American writers and critics, such as Frank Chin. Thus, in the second section of this chapter, I will trace these writings in her first two novels, but particularly in *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. Similarly to her best-known work, *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan’s mother-daughter narrative in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* ends in the reconciliation between the Chinese immigrant woman Winnie and her American born daughter Pearl. However, this harmonious emotional reunion is at the risk of reinforcing the stereotypes of the Chinese community, as in *The Joy Luck Club*. Except for Suyuan Woo from the *Joy Luck*, all the Chinese immigrant mothers in these two works have a painful and terrible experience with Chinese domestic gender roles, which are depicted by Tan as a dominating cruel male villain against a repressed female victim. For example, Suyuan’s best friend Lindo is forced to marry a spoiled young boy from a rich and conservative family when she is

just a teenager. The other Joy Luck Club members Ying-ying and An-mei have also had tragic experiences back in China. Ying-ying was abandoned by her first lecherous Chinese husband who ran away with another woman. An-mei's mother, a widow of a dead scholar, was raped by a rich merchant Wu Tsing, obliged to marry into his house as the third concubine, and then lost her son to the first concubine (the second wife), who was actually the one who tricked her to Wu Tsing's house for the pre-meditated rape. Suffering from unbearable oppression, An-mei's mother finally commits suicide. The story of Winnie (also known as Weili Jiang) in *The Kitchen God's Wife* contains many elements used by Tan in her creation of Lindo, Ying-ying, and An-mei's tragic Chinese experiences. Winnie's mother, who was also forced to marry a rich merchant as a concubine, strangely disappeared (believed to have committed suicide) when she was only a child. Her first Chinese husband Wen Fu, the leading male character and the embodiment of Tan's version of the Kitchen God, is spoiled by his family like Tyan-yu in Lindo's story and is more lecherous and abusing than Ying-ying's first anonymous husband. Overall, Wen Fu is the most typical character of Tan that comes close to the pejorative stereotype of Chinese men in American popular culture. Meanwhile, Winnie's second husband, Jimmy Louie, a former Chinese American officer serving in the US army, plays, in my opinion, the role of a quasi saviour from the West. Although Jimmy Louie is not white, he can still function as a rescuer from the Western world in Winnie's life. Although he cannot get Winnie out of prison, he still brings inspiration of rebellion and happiness to Winnie.

However, my intention here is not simply to contest Chin's accusations against

the male characters in Tan's novels only in terms of the fictional relationships that exhibit misogyny and the male oppression of women, but rather, to show how Chin's focus on some examples in Tan's fiction that support his critique about fake Chinese writers was premature in light of her later works as a whole. Tan does endeavour to explore multiple perspectives of male-female relationships within the Chinese-American community and in the context of a legacy of Chinese gender roles that developed in China and the challenges of different role expectations in the United States. Therefore, in addition to the analysis of the stereotype writing in her first two novels, the second section also involves discussion of her positive portrayal of Chinese men and male-female relationships that counter the stereotypes of the Chinese community that appear in her other novels.

The third section centres on Tan's portrayal of Chinese women as the authority of the family and the dominating figure, which is also a product of traditional Chinese family values. The existence of powerful mother figures shows a different side to Chinese women as well as the diversity of Tan's portrayal of Chinese gender roles. The first part of this third section will be a brief introduction to the historical background of dominant Confucianism influences on the construction of Chinese family and society. In the second part, I will discuss Tan's depiction of powerful mother figures, which ironically includes Chinese immigrant mothers who used to rebel against traditional Chinese family values. This section is strongly associated with my discussion about the mother-daughter relation in Chapter 4, in which the Chinese immigrant mothers' domestic authority will be analyzed. Therefore, other

dominant maternal figures will be my focus in this section.

In the fourth section, I will refer to Chin and other scholars' arguments to analyze the debate on the gendered inheritance and rewriting of Chinese culture and folklore in Tan's works. Besides the depiction of Chinese men, Tan's adaptation, or even creation, of Chinese fairy tales to Frank Chin and the other *Aiiieeee* writers is another fact that makes her a "fake" Chinese American writer, even if Chin seems to be manipulating Chinese legends and folklore on his behalf as well.

### **3.2. Stereotypes and Counter-Images of Chinese Men**

Tan's portrayal of Chinese men and conflicts between the two genders in Chinese traditional society begins with a negative stereotypical depiction, but she does not simply allow this depiction to stand alone. She provides counter-images that in turn challenge racialized American thought about the Chinese. In this section I will juxtapose Tan's negative and positive portrayals of Chinese men in her novels. These opposite depictions suggest that Tan's works should be analyzed from different angles rather than just defined or denied as an absolute reinforcement of stereotypes of the Chinese community.

#### **3.2.1. Stereotyping Chinese Men**

Chinese men in the immigrant mothers' stories, in Tan's first two novels *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, are portrayed as the sources of their tragic



life in China and the haunting memory that shapes these immigrant women into what they become in the United States, especially Wen Fu. As the former husband of Winnie, the protagonist of *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Wen Fu is a nightmare that haunts Winnie even in his death, which happens many decades later after Winnie travels to the United States. To Winnie, he is a disloyal and sexually abusive husband and a rapist. He has affairs with other women and even gets one of them killed in a careless car accident. During his stay in hospital after being seriously injured in this accident, he harasses every nurse, young or old, who tries to look after him. To his children, he is an uncaring and cruel parent. For example, Winnie once stands up for a servant girl who is raped by Wen Fu and who accidentally kills herself when she tries to get rid of Wen Fu's unborn baby by herself. Instead of abusing his wife Winnie as usual, Wen Fu chooses to torture their daughter Yiku to force Winnie give up her challenge to his authority.

I rushed over to Yiku, but Wen Fu pushed me away and I fell. And then I heard her cry again. Her breath finally came back! And she cried even louder, higher. Kwah! Wen Fu hit her again-kwah!-again and again. And by the time I could get to my feet and push my body in between, I saw Yiku had rolled up into a little ball. She was making small animal sounds. And I was crying and begging Wen Fu, "Forgive me! I was wrong! Forgive me!" (Tan, *Kitchen God*, 262).

Towards Winnie's merchant father and his rich family, Wen Fu is consumed by his limitless greed. His initial plan was to marry Winnie's cousin, Peanut, for her money

not for love, like most men back in 1930s-1940s' China, as Winnie narrates:

Getting married in those days was like buying real estate...Back in China, you saw a rich family with a daughter, you found a go-between who knew how to make a good business deal (Tan, *Kitchen God*, 134).

After they return to Shanghai at the end of the Second World War, Wen Fu begins to extort Winnie's father Jiang Sao-yen and collect every penny from him. When he is told there is gold in Jiang's house, he even tears down Jiang's bedroom wall, just as the latter passes away. Moreover, he enjoys bullying other people who are weaker than him. But as a pilot of the Chinese National Revolution Army, he is a coward who runs away from battles against the invading Japanese army and feels no shame for doing so. In addition, even his eligibility for becoming a trainee pilot is stolen from his dead brother Wen Chen. He just takes Wen Chen's name and credentials. On the one hand, among Tan's several major male characters, Wen Fu is the most typical example to display the stereotypical writing of Chinese men in her works. On the other hand, the protagonist Winnie is portrayed as a miserable female victim of Chinese patriarchy. Her mother, a concubine of her merchant father Jiang Sao-yen, mysteriously disappeared when she was only six years old. After this shocking and tragic incident, she is sent to live with her uncle and aunties'<sup>6</sup> family on Tsung Ming Island by Jiang Sao-yen, and never met her father again until her arranged marriage with Wen Fu. Through her early life, Winnie has never had a chance to express her own opinion and does not know how to speak for herself

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<sup>6</sup> One wife and one concubine

because of the conservative training that she has received since childhood. Even when she finally becomes an adult and married to Wen Fu, her mother in law still tries to train her to be a more obedient wife and teaches her “[t]o protect my husband so he would protect me. To fear him and think this was respect. To make him a proper hot soup, which was ready to serve only when I had scalded my little finger testing it” (168). With the intention of being a good wife, she acts in accordance with these instructions and tries her best to satisfy her husband, suffering from his perverse sexual demands every day. Nevertheless, “often in the morning he would complain, telling me I was not a good wife, that I had no passion, not like other women he knew. And my head and body would hurt as he told me about this woman and that woman, how good she was, how willing, how beautiful.” In response, Winnie reacts stereotypically: “I was not angry. I did not know I was supposed to be angry,” and states that “[t]his was China. A woman had no right to be angry. But I was unhappy, knowing my husband was still dissatisfied with me, and that I would have to go through more suffering to show him I was a good wife” (170). However, Winnie’s subsequent experiences of being physically and mentally abused by Wen Fu make her realize that she can never be a good wife to this man. She is condemned to be a miserable and helpless victim, until Jimmy Louie, the saviour from the West appears in her life.

In addition to the depiction of misogynistic villainous husbands and their miserable wives, Tan’s stereotypical portrayal of Chinese men in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* depicts the would-be Western male rescuer. Although Winnie’s second husband

Jimmy Louie is a Chinese American rather than white, he can still be classified as a Western saviour for his identity as a passionate Christian military officer and the gentle American husband who can offer Winnie a chance to go to the United States. He is also a caring and friendly man in Winnie's eyes. She quickly falls for his charms and gentleness when they meet each other at a military party for the first time. He seems to be completely different from Wen Fu in every aspect. He is a nice gentleman with a sense of humour that is appreciated by Winnie. However, in my opinion, Jimmy has a hypocritical part within him. For example, when Wen Fu asks Jimmy to give him an English name that is more important and special than Winnie's English name, Jimmy gives him the name "Judas", even though this Christian military officer barely knows Wen Fu at this time. After their second coincidental reunion in Shanghai, Winnie and Jimmy's love towards each other rapidly grows strong. Winnie's wish to be with Jimmy surpasses her fear of Wen Fu's domination and strengthens her will to get divorced, even if the cost is imprisonment. Furthermore, as a saviour, Jimmy's capacity is seriously limited. I suppose this arrangement is to highlight the struggles and rebellions of Chinese women. When Winnie is serving a prison sentence and forming friendships with her cell mates, all Jimmy Louie can do is write letters to her and tell her how much he loves her, how he prays for her, how he thinks his head "might burst from studying so hard," and how much fun it is "taking folk-dancing lessons at the YMCA" (379). At last, it is Winnie's friend Auntie Du, who helps her to get out of the prison. After that, she forces Wen Fu to accept the divorce and gets the opportunity to have a new life with her Western saviour Jimmy in the United States.

### 3.2.2. Counter-Images

Even if there are obvious stereotypical depictions of Chinese men in her novels, Tan cannot be simply seen as propagating stereotypes. When her whole work is taken into consideration, we can find decent Chinese male characters in her fiction works. For instance, even though LuLing, in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, is haunted by her tragic past which is directly associated with a Chinese male villain and an arranged marriage, like other Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, her story places Chinese men in an outstandingly positive light. Being raised in a family which runs an ink-making business in a village close to Beijing, LuLing does not know the truth about her real family. Her mother is actually her mute nursemaid, Precious Auntie, and her future father-in-law, the coffin merchant Chang, in fact, is the greedy cold-blooded murderer of Precious Auntie's father and husband, who is the youngest brother of the family and the real father of LuLing. When LuLing willingly follows her family's plan and is prepared to marry Chang's son, Precious Auntie tries to reveal the truth to LuLing and stops this arranged marriage by a hand written script. However, LuLing does not read to the end in which Precious Auntie claims to be her mother because she "did not want Precious Auntie poisoning [her] mind anymore" (Tan, *Bonesetter's Daughter*, 183). Therefore, when LuLing is asked by Precious Auntie in sign language, "[d]on't you have feelings for who I am," she answers in her ignorance: "[e]ven if the whole Chang family were murderers and thieves, I would join them just to get away from you" (184). Seriously hurt by her daughter's words, Precious Auntie writes a letter to the Changs, swears to be a

haunting ghost if their son marries LuLing, and then ends her own life with an ink stone cutting knife. After this incident, young LuLing is sent away by her family to an orphanage operated by two female American missionaries, Miss Grutoff and Miss Towler. There, she meets her first husband and true love Pan Kai Jing, an intelligent and warm-hearted geologist, who often comes to visit his father Teacher Pan in the orphanage. LuLing and Kai Jing are gradually attracted to each other. They share a romantic relationship and happy married life until a group of Japanese soldiers execute Kai Jing and his colleagues because they refuse to give away the information about the Communist underground resistance force. Kai Jing's death traumatizes LuLing. With grave sadness, she remembers his last words to her:

I was not there when this happened, yet I saw it. The only way I could push it out of my mind was to go into my memory. And there in that safe place, I was with him, and he was kissing me when he told me, "We are divine, unchanged by time" (231).

In addition to Kai Jing, Teacher Pan, Precious Auntie's father – the bonesetter, and her husband Baby Uncle, who is LuLing's true father, are all counter-images to stereotypes of Chinese men as patriarchal and abusive. Similarly to his son Kai Jing, Teacher Pan is a kindly gentleman. Precious Auntie's father, the bonesetter, is a highly skilled doctor and a single father who raises his daughter by himself. Unlike many other parents at that time, he does not bind his daughter's feet and allows her to be educated and grow up with a strong individuality. Meanwhile, Precious Auntie meets and falls in love with a generous and charming young man, Baby Uncle, the youngest

son from the ink-making family, who sacrifices his life when he tries to avenge her murdered father.

Apart from *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, counter-images of Chinese men appear in her other novels as well. For example, instead of gentle, intelligent and charming roles, the Chinese male character, Zeng, in the narrative of Nunumu (Kwan's pre-existence) from *The Hundred Secret Senses*, is barely educated but tough, honest and caring. His strategy of expressing love and care for Nunumu looks artless. The best gifts he can think about are practical items, such as jars for making salted duck eggs. However, when he gets the message about the Manchu government's intention to massacre Taiping insurrectionists and their supporters, he immediately goes to warn Nunumu. But Nunumu refuses to flee with Zeng alone. After a struggle with Nunumu, Zeng chooses to respect her decision to take her missionary friends and Miss Banner with them. They agree to wait until the right time for their collective escape. However, the Manchu soldiers act faster than they expected. As a result, Zeng is killed before he can go to meet Nunumu. But his ghost still tries to save Nunumu from her doom by leading her to a cave to hide, where he gives her his promise:

At last, Yiban came out of the archway. "Who are you speaking to?" he asked.

"Zeng," I said. "He's here. See?" I turned around. "Zeng? I can't see you. Wave your hand....Hey, where are you? Wait!"

"I will wait for you forever," I heard him whisper in my ear. Ai-ya!

That's when I knew Zeng wasn't joking. He was dead (203).

In his next life, Zeng is reincarnated as George and married to Kwan, as he suggested before leaving this world to the World of Yin, land of the dead.

Even in Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Chinese men are not all portrayed in the same way as Wen Fu. Jiaguo, the first husband of Winnie's best friend Hulan, is generally seen in a positive light. During her stay in Yangchow, Winnie secretly falls in love with one of Wen Fu's and Jiaguo's colleagues, Gan, who makes people "feel better about themselves" (200). From the interactions with Gan and other pilots who are all kind to her, Winnie begins to realize that "I could have married a good man" (201). When Gan tragically dies from his wound after Japanese pilots shot down his plane, Winnie grieves intensely and regrets that she has never tried to claim Gan's love, as she says:

So after Gan died, that's when I claimed his love. He became like a ghost lover. Whenever Wen Fu shouted at me, I would remember the last time Gan came to my house for dinner. He had watched me all evening, the way Wen Fu treated me. And when my husband went out of the room, Gan looked at me, then quietly said, "You see yourself only in a mirror. But I see you the way you can never see yourself, all the pure things, neither good nor bad" (205).

Gan's role in *The Kitchen God's Wife* is small. His appearance and other pilots' kindness to Winnie constitute a brief part of Winnie's Chinese memory. However, in my opinion, Tan's descriptions of these minor Chinese male characters deserve attention and need to be seen as part of a broad range of representations. The



existence of these more positive Chinese male characters, make Wen Fu's case more like an exception. That is to say, while the portrayal of Wen Fu might be regarded as a typical stereotype of Chinese men, it cannot function as a representation of all Chinese men, whether in *The Kitchen God's Wife* or in Tan's work in general.

### **3.3. The Other Side of Chinese Women**

Chinese women are not always described as stereotypical miserable victims in Tan's works. In some situations, they are also portrayed as defenders of traditional family values, which are not only the reason for Chinese women's inferior social status but also the source of their power within the moral system of the traditional family construction. Certainly, this power of women is weaker than that of men. However, it is necessary to note that traditional Chinese family values do not just involve the oppression of women but the oppression of men, moreover, the power of women who are inverted in this moral system and who are familiar with the rules. To elaborate this further, I will provide a brief outline of traditional Chinese family values in this section. Meanwhile, this section will also discuss Tan's depictions of female authority and power, which, as well as the depiction of decent and good Chinese male characters, produce another counter-image to the stereotype of Chinese men.

### **3.3.1. A Brief Introduction to Traditional Chinese Family Values**

According to Chinese scholar Genhong Dong, ancient China developed into an agricultural society from the blood lineage society, as a result of China's special geographical features. The wide-ranging fertile land is enclosed by ocean, deserts, jungles, and great mountains which make this land isolated from other civilizations of the world as barriers (26). An elementary commodity economy and slow population migration was one of the most important features of Ancient Chinese society. People were tightly bound to their clans and families who inhabited certain regions for many generations. Numerous clans developed into self-sufficient villages or towns. Based on these communities, the entire Ancient Chinese society was formed as an enlarged patriarchal family, with a strict hierarchical system and an alpha father figure, the sovereign, as its ruler. For the patriarch in each family, how to maintain the proper order among family members was a crucial issue. Similarly, for the sovereign, the operation of society was closely attached to a strict hierarchical order that defined the position of individuals, classes, and departments. Confucianism, founded in Eastern Zhou dynasty's Spring and Autumn Period (770 – 476 BC) by Confucius (551 – 479 BC), has been given dominant status as the guiding ideology in Chinese imperialistic society since 135 BC because of its theoretical system that poses practical social orders for traditional Chinese monarchism. For instance, Confucian harmony, to which I refer in Chapter 2, is a product of a blood lineage society and helped to build up a peaceful co-existence and co-operation among family members and social

classes of the whole country under the domination of patriarchal power.

In Chinese history, sociological conceptions of Confucius have been revised by his many successors, particularly in the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 AD). Based on the original Confucianism, these Confucian scholars utilized theories from other schools of philosophy and religions, and gradually produced some stricter codes of conduct, such as *San Gang Wu Chang* for every individual and *San Cong Si De* for Chinese women. According to *San Gang*/the three cardinal guides, which are not part of Confucius' original theories, the sovereign of the whole country has unconditional power over his subjects, as does the father over his sons, and the husband over his wife. Men must follow *Wu Chang*/the five constant virtues – benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity, while the women are restricted by *San Cong Si De*, the three obedience rules and four virtues. To be a “good” daughter, wife, and mother, a Chinese woman must be obedient to her father before marriage, absolutely follow her husband's will after marriage, and listen to her son when she loses her husband and becomes a widow. Moreover, she has to abide by *Si De*/the four virtues – modest manner, diligent attitude, proper speech, and morality.

With this promotion of the absolute authority of the sovereign, the father and the husband, *San Gang Wu Chang* and *San Cong Si De* have dominated Chinese morality and forged a radical hierarchy that is comparatively more oppressive for women, although these two notions are criticized as unauthentic or even treacherous to the original Confucianism by some scholars. As for the social status of men and women, the initial notions of Confucius, who was raised by his single mother since

the age of three, are debatable. For instance, in one of Confucius' famous quotes, *Wei Nv Zi Yu Xiao Ren Wei Nan Yang Ye* is explained in different ways by scholars. To Amy Ling, this quote is Confucius' classification of "women with slaves and small humans ('hsiao ren')'" and it clearly "revealed his attitude that he has been called an 'eater of women'" (3). But to other scholars, such as Yuancheng Zhou, this quote means that it is difficult for women to work with "small humans", namely servants or slaves. Apart from this quote, Ling also finds two misogynistic poems from *The Book of Songs*, which is regarded as one of the classics of Confucianism, to prove the inferior place of Chinese women since ancient time. According to Zhou, however, there are also poems like *Guan Jiu* and other quotes from *Analects of Confucius* to prove that Confucius was supportive of women. Moreover, Confucius believed that there must be bidirectional respect between the sovereign and the subjects, and the fathers and the sons, rather than the complete obedience the latter Confucians have suggested. Otherwise, in my opinion, Confucius' original works would not have been burned during the Qin Dynasty's *Fen Shu Keng Ru* (translated as the burning of books and the burying alive of scholars, 213 – 212 BC) incident. They were considered threats to the extreme rule of The First Emperor, who was the founder of Chinese centralism. Nevertheless, Confucianism was gradually transformed to fit the demand of extreme centralism under which the society was centered round the emperor, the alpha father figure of the country.

The dominance of this reformed Confucianism led to the severe oppression of women and the stress placed on the emphasis on women's chastity. In addition, in

many situations, it was the women who were trained to obey the revised Confucian family values from a young age, and actually practised the oppressions and regulations toward women. According to the records in *Lie Nv Zhuan*, there were many women who chose brutal self-harm or suicide in order to protect their purity. For example, He Da Feng's widow Ruan cut off her own fingers because someone had accidentally touched her when passing some items to her. Hu's wife Qiu chose to let herself drown in a flood rather than get into a boat with some naked neighbours. Daughters of He's family refused to leave their burning house at night and they were burned to death because they did not have enough clothes to cover their bodies. Chinese scholar Binling Wang points out that these examples from *Lie Nv Zhuan* display how twisted the Confucian morality had become since the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 AD), and how different it is from the concepts of some early Confucian scholars. Mengzi (372-289 BC), a significant Confucian scholar whose theories are closer to Confucius' conceptions, was once asked if a man should save his brother's wife because Mengzi promoted the chasteness of women. The answer from Mengzi is that "if one does not save his brother's wife from drowning, then he is a jackal other than man" (cited in Wang 377). Obviously, in Mengzi's opinion, it was essential to keep the purity of women and the necessary distance between a woman and men other than her husband, but it was also necessary to relax the rules in urgent situations.

The First Opium War between China and Britain broke out in 1840 and simultaneously started a long-term (still going) reformation of Chinese traditional society, which began to accept Western influences in political, economic, cultural and

philosophical aspects. After the 1911 Revolution, which marked the end of China's imperialism, and the 1919 May Fourth New Culture Movement, in which the participants declared the need to overthrow Confucianism, traditional Chinese family values were seriously challenged, although they continue to be influential in many regions and families.

### **3.3.2. The Different Side of Chinese Women**

Apart from showing how women's purity is over valued, the examples from *Lie Nv Zhuan* also reveal a different side of Chinese women as strong (or even stronger) defenders of traditional Chinese family values. Trained by their parents in Confucian conceptions about women's social status, many Chinese women, as well as men, have accepted this regulation and reject any changes. Hence, their identity becomes a combination of victims and defender.

In the narratives of the immigrant mothers in Tan's works, it is not difficult to find examples of this combination. There are several Chinese women characters, normally the elders, who are the advocates of traditional values, having to abide by them. For example, Lindo's mother-in-law, Huang Taitai, and An-Mei's Popo (grandmother), both in *The Joy Luck Club*, along with Winnie's aunties and mother-in-law are all typical examples. After Lindo's wedding to Tyan-yu, Huang Taitai (mother of Tyan-yu) becomes the maternal figure and the instructor of family regulations to young Lindo, who has to call Huang Taitai "Ma" (mother) and cook a

special tonic soup every day for her. However, to Huang Taitai, Lindo's obedience is far from satisfactory because her only concern seems to be Tyan-yu's offspring and the future inheritor of the entire Huang family, which Lindo cannot provide. As a young boy, Tyan-yu has neither knowledge of reproduction nor sexual desire for Lindo. All he can do to answer his mother's enquiries is to lie to her and tell her that Lindo either refuses to sleep with him or that he has "planted enough seeds inside her body for thousands of grandchildren" (62), but she has lost them. Therefore, Lindo becomes a "bad wife" who needs more discipline, according to Huang Taitai's belief in traditional gender roles. Furthermore, in Lindo's story we can see that, as the widow of the master of the house, the power of the mistress Huang Taitai is not just over her new daughter-in-law, but also over her son and embodies the oppression of men in Chinese society. While Lindo sobs for her lost right of choosing her husband, Tyan-yu's freedom of choice has been violated by his mother since he was born, but he is too young to be aware of this fact. The case of Huang Taitai in Lindo's narrative shows the authority of female elders and the duality of both Chinese men and women's roles in a traditional Chinese family. According to *San Cong*, the mother has to follow her son if her husband is dead. However, if the son is still young, it is the mother's responsibility to temporarily possess the power as the master of the house. Moreover, it is possible to interpret the mother's obedience to the son as the weakest link in *San Cong* because it is frequently challenged by the practice of filial piety, which is a concept requiring children to be obedient to their parents.

Apart from Huang Taitai, An-mei's Popo is also an example of a female

elder's authority. She has the power to banish An-mei's "disgraceful" mother from the house because she does not believe her daughter's story of being raped by the merchant Wu Tsing. Young An-mei is forbidden to see her mother and speak her name as Popo warns her, "To say her name is to spit on your father's grave" (Tan, *Joy Luck*, 43). Similarly, in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, after her mother's mysterious disappearance, Winnie is sent to Tsung-ming Island to live with her uncle's family. For the next twelve years, her uncle's two wives, Old Aunt and New Aunt replace her biological mother as the mother figures. They train her to follow the tradition of being a good wife and arranging her marriage with Wen Fu. In the narrative of American-born daughters, it is the Chinese immigrant mothers who appear as the elderly female authority and play the role of the defenders of traditional Chinese family values. Even though the requirement to be totally obedient to the husband is somewhat relaxed, the Chinese mothers' authority over the education of the American daughters was still paramount.<sup>7</sup>

### **3.4. The Case of Kitchen God's Myth: Gendered Inheritance and Rewriting of Chinese Folklores in Tan's works**

Frank Chin regards Tan, along with Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Hwang, as "fake" Chinese American writers for their portrayal of Chinese men as misogynistic and of patriarchal gender roles in China. In his article "Come All Ye

<sup>7</sup> This topic will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.



Asian American Writers,” he argues that “Chinese and Japanese culture are not more misogynistic than Western culture” (9). The proof of his claim is in Chinese history stories and fairy tales that are “boldly” transformed into “fake” by Tan to serve her purpose of bashing Chinese men, according to Chin. He insists that the fairy tale at the beginning of *The Joy Luck Club* is “not Chinese but white racist,” because “[d]ucks in the barnyard are not the subject of Chinese fairy tales, except as food. Swans are not the symbols of physical female beauty, vanity, and promiscuity that they are in the West...There is nothing in Chinese fairy tales to justify characterizing the Chinese as measuring a woman’s worth by the loudness of her husband’s belch” (3). With regard to the Kitchen God, Tan’s version tells a story of a rich farmer Zhang and his hardworking wife Guo. They both lived a comfortable life until one day Zhang brought a pretty woman, Lady Li, back to home. This newcomer chased Guo out of the house and quickly spent everything Zhang had. Once he was trapped in poverty, she immediately left him with another man. To survive, Zhang became a beggar and lived a harsh life. One day, when the totally exhausted man finally fell to the ground, the abandoned wife Guo saved him. When Zhang regained full consciousness, he jumped into the kitchen fireplace because of unbearable shame and regret. Moved by his regret and courage in punishing himself for this mistake, the Jade Emperor appointed him to the position of Kitchen God to watch over everyone’s behaviour from the kitchen fireplace. However, his hard working wife Guo is eternally forgotten. Chin regards this adaptation of a traditional myth as another of Tan’s attempts to fake Chinese mythology. In an interview with Terry Hong, he

indicates that the Kitchen God's story has many versions and none of them is dominant and influential in Chinese culture. For example, in the one which Hong claims is the basic one, the Kitchen God was once a sad poor young man. To help him out of the depression caused by poverty, his wife put some pieces of gold in cakes without telling him the truth. She hoped he would believe this was help from the gods, but unfortunately, he sold these cakes in the market. When he finally finds out the truth, he commits suicide because he thinks he has failed his wife's love. "And you found out the kitchen god's image is always depicted as part of a double poster with the wife, that both the husband and wife are honored, and therefore the wife is not denigrated....In Tan's book, she asks why the kitchen queen is not honored. But she is. That means the whole premise of Tan's book is wrong," says Chin to Terry Hong (Hong, "Searching for Chin"). Therefore, the Kitchen God's tale is another example of Tan's misuse/"faking" of the Chinese fairy tale in her stereotype writing of Chinese men, judging by Chin's standards.

Unlike Chin's opinion that "myths are, by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths" (Chin "Come All Ye" 29), I want to suggest that myths do change over time and the Kitchen God's tales are proof of this. In different regions of China, the Kitchen God's images have gone through several important transformations and developed into different versions. According to Chinese mythologist Yuan Ke, the roach, an insect frequently seen close to the kitchen fireplace, initiated the first animalized Kitchen God's image. German Sinologist Eduard Erkes believes that the Kitchen God's figure

in the Han ethnic group originates from the frog. When human society evolved from a totem-worshipping primitive society to a matriarchal society, and then to a patriarchal society, the Kitchen God's figure was accordingly transformed from animal to female and then to male. The myths of the Kitchen God were absorbed and influenced by Daoism culture and later developed into the Kitchen Gods' system. In *The Complete Book of Kitchen Spirit Worship*, there are twenty Kitchen Gods in Daoism (cited in Jifu Lin 100-02). In addition to these images, the Kitchen God may have different figures in different regions. He may have positive personalities, such as hardworking, kind, honest, simple minded, or negative characteristics, like lazy, gossipy, ruttish, and greedy. The closest version to Amy Tan's portrayal of the Kitchen God is from Eastern Shandong province (Jin Wang). The major difference between this version and Tan's adaptation is that Zhang's wife Ding Xiang, in Shandong folklore, is more memorized for her filial piety towards her parents in law, unlike Guo in Tan's story, who is known for her hard work and loyalty to her husband.

Even if we accept Chin's argument that the Kitchen God is too minor to be considered as an example to represent Chinese gender roles, there are still many famous classics involving misogyny against women and one of them is *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, which is used by Chin to promote his version of Chinese masculinity (and is also a typical example of changing historical records and incidents for the purpose of arts in my opinion.) The heroism and loyalty to brotherhood among Liu Pai, Kuan Yu, and Chang Fei, in this classic historical novel are highly praised by Chin. However, Liu Pai's famous quote: "Brothers are like limbs. Wives are like

clothes. It is possible to repair broken clothes but no way to rejoin the parted limbs” seems to be undermining Chin’s argument and proves that there is a misogynistic side in Chinese history. Furthermore, Chinese scholar Wenshu Zhao points out that in Chin’s so-called authentic writing of Chinese culture there is actually misrepresentation as well. For example, in Chin’s work *Gunga Din Highway*, the three leading major characters imitate Liu, Kuan, and Chang’s example and establish a brotherhood bond through loyalty to friendship, but all they have in mind is drugs and sex, and one of them even wants to have intercourse with the daughter of his friend. This kind of so-called Chinese masculinity is nothing close to the heroism within the original *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, in which Kuan Yu risks his life to protect Liu Pai’s wives. From Zhao’s point of view, if Chin’s foe Kingston must be blamed as a “fake” Chinese American writer, her attacker should not be Chin, another Chinese American writer who also manipulates Chinese culture. In Tan’s case, Zhao’s opinion seems to be suitable as well, because of Chin’s revision of Confucian theories and his own Christianization of Chinese folklores. In addition, as King-Kok Cheung pointed out, apart from the heroism of valorous warriors whom Chin appreciates and sees as representation of the Chinese masculinity, “the strategic brilliance of characters [of *Romance of Three Kingdoms*] such as Chou Yu and Chuko Liang,” whom Cheung regards as “Odysseus” of China, is highly respected in Chinese culture (Cheung, “Warrior Woman.” 315). Therefore, Chin’s representation of Chinese culture is also unreliable and questionable, if Tan is regarded as a “fake” Chinese American writer for modifying Chinese myths. Furthermore, mistakes in translation of the

famous Chinese classic folklore *The Ballad of Mulan* can be found in the “Come All Ye” article. This disadvantage surely weakened Chin’s attack on Maxine Hong Kingston, who is as “fake” as Tan is to him.

### 3.5. Conclusion

Even if *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* do contain negative and stereotypical portrayals of Chinese men and the Chinese community, Tan cannot be simply defined as an airing dirty laundry writer or “fake” Chinese American writer. If studied as a whole, we can also find counter-images to the stereotypes that shed positive light on Chinese men in her writing. Moreover, her descriptions of the dominant maternal figures and the oppressed male figures provide a multi-dimensional understanding of the traditional Chinese family values. With regard to Chinese myths and legends, which are strongly associated with gender issues in Chinese American literature criticism, Chinese and Chinese American critics should be cautious with the accusations of “fake” and “real,” from my point of view, when the definitions of “fake” and “real” are debatable. Most importantly, Tan’s writing of the gender relationship in the mother-narratives has gone through several changes. Judging by her latest mother-daughter narrative *The Bonesetter's Daughter*,<sup>8</sup> this gender relationship ends in a harmonious status, instead of the intensity depicted in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Although LuLing’s first marriage can

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<sup>8</sup> Tan’s latest published novel *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) should not be considered a mother-daughter narrative.

be regarded as a tragedy in general, the real cause of her pain is her former husband Kai Jing's brave death during his resistance against the invading Japanese army. Unlike those *Joy Luck* mothers (except Suyuan) and Winnie's husband, Kai Jing provides LuLing with a short-term but happy and harmonious marriage before his death.

## Chapter 4 Portrait of Chinese Mothers

### 4.1. Introduction

My focus of this chapter is the reconciliation among matrilineal generations in Tan's works. In Chinese American literature studies, Tan is firmly associated with the matrilineal format and a sub-genre of Asian American fiction: the "fiction of matrilineage," which is created by Maxine Hong Kingston, the author of *Woman Warrior* (Grice 35). Her works are featured for her description of the conflicts between and the reunion of the immigrant mothers and their American daughters. This chapter begins with an exploration of the causes of the conflicts in Tan's fictional mother-daughter relations, which are products of both intergenerational and intercultural factors. Compared to the intercultural factors, intergenerational factors can trigger a wider range of intensity among matrilineal generations. In addition to the links between Chinese immigrant mothers and American daughters, the relations of Chinese immigrant mother-Chinese grandmother/other female authorities, are challenged by intergenerational conflicts. On the other hand, the intercultural conflicts can exacerbate the intensity between the mothers and the daughters. The differences between Chinese culture and American culture are seen by the American daughter as weapons to use against her Chinese mother. After the discussion of the conflicts, the analysis will focus on the issue of reconciliation among matrilineal generations, which is achieved due to the daughters' linguistic approach to the mothers, and by subjectivation of the mothers, which are related to the historical background and

debate about the representation of history.

## 4.2. The Causes of the Conflicts

The mother-daughter relations portrayed in Tan's works are frequently seen as troubled by intergenerational and intercultural conflicts, which can be extremely radical and can merge with each other. On the one hand, the Chinese mothers are rejected for being the mother, the authority that restrains the daughter from seeking her own identity and freedom. On the other hand, they are *othered* and alienated for being Chinese immigrants to those daughters who are born and raised with US ideologies. In short, they are doubly rejected.

### 4.2.1. The Rejected Mother

According to the Freudian Oedipal family paradigm, "[i]t is the woman as daughter who occupies the center of the global reconstruction of subjectivity and subject-object relation," and "[t]he woman as *mother* remains in the position of other, and the emergence of feminine-daughterly subjectivity rests and depends on that continued and repressed process of *othering* the mother." Furthermore, "[d]aughter and mother are separated and forever trapped by the institution, the function of motherhood (qtd. in Heung 598). From Freud's point of view, the son will finally choose his father over his mother and reject the castrated maternal figure. Unlike her



brother, the female child/the daughter sees the mother as a much more complex existence. Although she has a desire to be separated from her mother as the son does, there is always an unbreakable psychic bound between the mother and the daughter because the daughter's love for her mother can surpasses the love for her father and her will to be completely parted from the mother. Meanwhile, the mother regards the daughter as an "extension" of herself, when her "identification with the daughter was likewise posited as stronger than that with the son and heavily imbued with narcissistic tendencies" (Grice 38). Freud's theory of motherhood and the mother-daughter dyad has been questioned by subsequent scholars such as Nancy Chodorow, whose studies on the mother-daughter relationship focus on the mother rather than the father. However, as Helena Grice indicated, both Freudian theories and Chodorow's notion are not quite suitable in terms of the mother-daughter relationship that is rooted in non-Western cultures. To analyze Amy Tan's fictional mother figures and mother-daughter relationship, Grice suggests Adrienne Rich's theories because of "Rich's own experience of cultural marginalization as a Jewish American woman" (42).

In her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich points out that motherhood is "more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism" (33). The "first sense" of "her own existence" a child can have is from the "mother's responsive gestures and expressions," as Rich indicated (36). For a woman, her "first knowledge" of "warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality" (218), is given by her mother as well. Nevertheless, the emotional links between the

mother and the daughter are composed of hate and love simultaneously. According to Rich, on the one hand, there is always a “girl-child” within every woman who still “long[s] for a woman’s nurture, tenderness, and approval, a woman’s power exerted in [the child’s] defense, a woman’s smell and touch and voice, a woman’s strong arms around [the child] in moments of hurt and pain” (224-25). On the other hand, the female child is also afraid of “becoming” her mother and is disturbed by the concept of “Matrophobia” (235), which is defined as a “womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of [women’s] mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free” (236). Furthermore, from Rich’s narration and analysis of her own life experience, we can also learn that many women may have chances to meet other mothers who are not the biological mother but still act as a surrogate of the mother. In other words, the mothering can be in diverse forms rather than being limited by the biological bond.

The binary emotions between the mother and the daughter can be found in Tan’s *The Bonesetters’ Daughter*. The Chinese grandmother character Precious Auntie initially appeared in LuLing’s life as her nursemaid, even though she was actually LuLing’s biological mother. To the knowledge of the young LuLing, one of her aunts is her “real” mother, yet she is still emotionally attached to Precious Auntie, who always takes good care of her. However, when LuLing is going to be married and is happy with this arrangement, Precious Auntie begins to protest and one of her strategies is refusing to accompany LuLing to Peking to meet her future husband’s family. When LuLing finally discovers that she is a spoiled young girl, who does not

know how to dress up properly, Precious Auntie becomes a blameworthy surrogate of the mother, in LuLing's opinion. "I was a grown girl, and there I was, helpless and stupid beyond belief. That was how well Precious Auntie had raised me," complains LuLing (170). Apart from being spoiled, the most important thing that has changed the young LuLing's attitude towards Precious Auntie, is that she is about to be "a married woman" (180) but Precious Auntie is trying to keep her from doing so. In the young LuLing's belief, her "nursemaid" is just trying to keep her position as a servant in the family and hold power over her. For a moment, LuLing "pitied her [Precious Auntie] in the same way I pitied beggars I could not look in the eye" (167). Nevertheless, when she returns from Peking, LuLing wanders "from room to room, from little courtyard to little courtyard" and "[w]ith each passing moment, I felt more anxious to see her," because she wants to share her "adventures" and "pleasures" with this "mother-like" nursemaid (180).

In addition to nursemaid, grandmothers, aunts, mothers in law, female teachers, mother-surrogate females and mythic mothers in folklore, are other female figures that can function as the substitute for the biological mother, according to Adrienne Rich's theory (cited in Grice 45). They are also teachers and protectors of the traditions and culture in the Chinese community. Within Tan's narratives, the first outstanding example is definitely the Joy Luck aunts. After Suyuan Woo's sudden death, Auntie Lindo, An-mei, and Ying-ying automatically take her position as the maternal figures for June. They arrange a meeting for June and her sister Suyuan left behind in China during World War II, and purchase a ticket for her, without her

permission. They try to make June inherit her mother's Chineseness by placing her on the East at the mahjong table. They are also worried, when June tells them she does not know what she can tell her sisters in China about their mother. They can see their own American born daughters' Western arrogance and ignorance toward them and their Chinese culture. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, sisterhood is highlighted instead of the mother-daughter relationship. Olivia's Chinese older half-sister Kwan bears the most responsibility as a nurturing mother, and a teacher of Chinese culture for Olivia. Other female elders, such as grandmother, mother in law, and aunties, in Tan's narrative frequently play the roles of surrogate mother figures and some of them can be quite repressive, like Lindo's former mother-in-law Huang Taiai and Winnie's two aunties who raise her after her mother's mysterious disappearance. These women are both traditional instructors to the rebellious Chinese mothers in their young age and victims of Chinese patriarchal morality (Xiaohui Chen 18). The mystical goddess, the Moon Lady in Chinese folklore plays an important part in young Ying-ying's early life. Her earliest recollection is telling this goddess her secret wish. Being born in a rich family and lacking a mother's nurture throughout the whole of her life, Ying-ying views the Moon Lady as the one to whom she can pour out her heart. However, when she finds out that the Moon Lady is played by a male actor, she feels betrayed.

From Ying-ying's case, we can see that the mother-daughter relations are significantly influenced by patriarchal power in some conservative environments, such as the traditional Chinese society, according to Rich, who suggests that "[f]ew women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough" (243). The

mother's love for her daughter and her "struggles on [the daughter's] behalf" are "too restricted" (243). Furthermore, "it is the mother through whom the patriarch early teaches the small female her proper expectations" (243). In Tan's novels, few Chinese immigrant mothers "growing up in patriarchal society" feel "mothered enough." In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie is a daughter who lost her mother at a young age. However, unlike the story of An-mei and LuLing, in which we can also find suicidal mothers who end their own lives on their daughters' behalf, the disappearance of Winnie's concubine mother does not make any clear and firm sense to her. She just overhears some rumors that there might have been a young man who was the true love of her mother, and who led to Winnie's motherless life. In the meantime, Lindo's mother, who obviously has a strong love towards her daughter, is the helpless mother who is obliged to be the instructor of patriarchal rules. After Lindo was engaged to Tyan-yu Heung, her mother began to train her as a future good wife and a daughter who belongs to others. Losing one's mother is a common theme in Tan's mother narrative. When the role of these immigrant mothers is transferred from the daughter to the mother, they have to experience the intergenerational conflicts that are tied to intercultural conflicts.

### 4.2.2. The Alienated Chinese Maternal Figures

The second cause of the mother-daughter narrative is the mothers' status as "aliens." Sheng-mei Ma points out that the laws of the United States specify all foreign nationals as "aliens," no matter whether they are "legal or illegal," "resident or nonresident." Even with US citizenship, Asian immigrants are continually "alien-ated" because of their physical appearance, culture and language differences (Ma 11). In addition, this alienation is also strongly associated with white racist stereotypes and prejudices for historical reasons. Amy Ling in her book *Between Worlds* suggests that in the history of the United States, the impression of China has gone through several changes "between admiration and contempt" (18). Inspired by the theories of Harold Isaacs and A.T. Steele, Ling concludes that Chinese-US relations can be regarded as "a phenomenon" called a "swinging pendulum," which begins in the eighteenth century. Isaacs uses the term "Age of Respect" to describe the Chinese-US relationship during that period (qtd. in Ling 18). At that time, Europeans valued Chinese "things" that were brought to the American colonial states, such as "the highly rationalistic philosophy of Confucius" and "the Confucian hierarchical social structure" (18). However, this respect faded in the next century, especially from 1840-1905, when Europeans "discovered" that China was too weak to defend herself from European "military and economic" aggression (18). The First Opium War, which broke out in 1840 with the victory of the United Kingdom, was a crucial turning point. As a result, Chinese-American relations in the nineteenth century entered the period named "The Age of Contempt" by Isaacs. During this period, the first group of

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Chinese labourers travelled from China to the United States because of the Gold Rush and their dream of becoming rich in 1852. Apart from being the pioneers of the Chinese American community, they were also the first group of victims violated by the white racist and dominant culture.<sup>9</sup>

It is also important to note that the orientalist stereotypes of Chinese men and women were produced during this “Age of Contempt.” Apart from the stereotypes of the Chinese men, there are two common stereotypes of Chinese women, which are “Shy Lotus Blossom”/“China Doll” and “Dragon Lady.” They represent two “polar extremes” of white men’s construction of Chinese women and parallel the duality in the conceptualization of white women, particularly in the nineteenth century, as either angels or whores. The angel/“Shy Lotus Blossom,” as Amy Ling puts it, is always “modest and shy,” “tittering behind her delicate ivory hand, eyes downcast, always walking 10 steps behind her man” (12). Most importantly, she is willing to “devote her body and soul” to her man, while the dangerous and seductive whore/“Dragon Lady” has “talon-like six-inch fingernails” and a “skin-tight satin dress slit to the thigh” (12). Nevertheless, no matter how much their personalities and appearance differ from each other; the unchanging common thing is that they are both Orientals who are the “others” to the West. Even if the Chinese immigrant mothers are portrayed as counter-images to these two stereotypes by Tan, they are seen as the others and aliens by the daughters who are influenced by prejudices and racism from white culture.

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 3 for more details.

In traditional Chinese culture, the mother is responsible for nurturing the children and training them to follow the traditional family values. The Chinese mothers in their young age were heroines who fought for their freedom and happiness. However, when the American daughter characters begin to gradually grow up as descendants of Chinese immigrants in the United States, the immigrant mothers appear to be the representation of Chinese traditional family values that are opposite to the American ideologies in many aspects. In other words, the oppressed Chinese immigrant mothers have turned into oppressing matriarchs in front of their American daughters, through the decades they spent in the United States. For instance, to satisfy her mother Lindo, Waverly once married a Chinese American man. Lindo's attitude toward her second white boyfriend Rich is the major issue in Waverly's story, which focuses on her effort in getting approval from her mother. In Waverly's eyes, her mother Lindo has the capacity to make her see black where she once saw white and has always been "the queen, able to move in all directions, relentless in her pursuit, always able to find my weakest spots." This mother and daughter pair has a long history of fighting with each other, from playing chess to the daughter's first boyfriend, and then her current white boyfriend Rich. Waverly is afraid that Lindo holds a grudge against Rich. This thought seriously depresses her but she also feels powerless to stand against this maternal authority, even though she was born and raised in the United States.

"Why don't you tell her to stop torturing you," said Marlene, [one of Waverly's friends]. "Tell her to stop ruining your life. Tell her to shut up."



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“That’s hilarious,” I said with a half-laugh. “You want me to tell my mother to shut up?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Well, I don’t know if it’s explicitly stated in the law, but you can’t ever tell a Chinese mother to shut up. You could be charged as an accessory to your own murder” (180).

In order to make Lindo accept Rich, Waverly has to practise different tricks, including inviting Lindo to her apartment, which is obviously occupied by a couple rather than a single mother, a purposeful visit to Auntie Suyuan’s house, and taking Rich to a family dinner. When none of her strategies seems to work well, she finally goes straight to Lindo and seeks approval. At last, by her mother’s side, she sees what she has been fighting for: “It was for me, a scared child, who had run away a long time ago to what I had imagined was a safer place. And hiding in this place, behind my invisible barriers, I knew what lay on the other side: Her side attacks. Her secret weapons. Her uncanny ability to find my weakest spots. But in the brief instant that I had peered over the barriers I could finally see what was really there: an old woman, wok for her armor, a knitting needle for her sword, getting a little crabby as she waited patiently for her daughter to invite her in” (184).

In Lena’s story, Ying-ying teaches young Lena to finish all the rice in her bowl; otherwise her future husband is going to be in trouble. In her narration about her ruined family house in Shanghai, Suyuan reveals that Chinese mothers are still emotionally attached to the Chinese family model, although the oppression of the

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women once triggered their rebellion.

And then I found my doll, with her hands and legs broken, her hair burned off....When I was a little girl, I had cried for that doll, seeing it all alone in the store windows, and my mother had bought it for me... And when I married and left my family home, I gave the doll to my youngest niece, because she was like me. She cried if that doll was not with her always. Do you see? If she was in the house with that doll, her parents were there, and so everybody was there, waiting together, because that's how our family was. (273).

From this paragraph, Suyuan declares that compared to individual freedom and independence that is accepted and appreciated by American daughters, "family" is still the Chinese mothers' first concern. Consequently, the mothers, who are former disobedient young Chinese heroines become new defenders of Chinese traditional family values (the improved version without the absolute obedience to the husband).

In this situation, the family expectation and the mothers' intrusion into American daughters' lives or even privacy lead to the conflicts between the two generations. For example, Yong June/Jing-mei is forced to play the piano by her mother Suyuan, who wishes she could be a pianist. When June protests, "[w]hy don't you like me the way I am? I'm not a genius! I can't play the piano. And even if I could, I wouldn't go on TV if you paid me a million dollars" (136), Suyuan just insists that she keep practising. After June fails in a school performance and begins to believe she has been released from this burden, Suyuan still urges her to keep

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practising, because as many Chinese parents in both China and overseas, Suyuan expects the best of her daughter June. Finally, their differences lead to a dramatic fight.

“You want me to be someone that I’m not!” I sobbed. “I’ll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!”

“Only two kinds of daughters,” She shouted in Chinese. “Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!”

“Then I wish I wasn’t your daughter. I wish you weren’t my mother,” I shouted. As I said these things I got scared. It felt like worms and toads and slimy things crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, as if this awful side of me had surfaced, at last.

“Too late change this,” said my mother shrilly.

And I could sense her anger rising to its breaking point. I wanted to see it spill over. And that’s when I remembered the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about. “Then I wish I’d never been born!” I shouted.

“I wish I were dead! Like them” (142).

If Suyuan and June’s case suggests one extreme of the struggle between the family expectation and individual demand, Lindo and Waverly’s story about playing chess represents another extreme. When the mothers’ expectation is matched with the success of the daughters, the mothers are honoured by this achievement because they believe this is a result of their support and guidance. Lindo considers her Waverly’s

success in playing chess as her personal honour and a product of her wisdom. Once after a chess game, she tells Waverly, “Lost eight piece this time. Last time was eleven. What I tell you? Better off lose less” (97). Furthermore, Lindo enjoys taking young Waverly to visit shops in Chinatown. Apart from shopping, she wants to get more chances to proudly announce that the young “China Town Chess Champion” is her daughter. Finally, Waverly cannot stand Lindo’s flaunting. She tells her to learn to play chess if she wants to show off and runs away. Unsurprisingly, when she gets home, she is scolded by Lindo for having no concern about the family. Another product from this “personal achievement-family honor” dyad is the comparison of children within/among families. Willingly or reluctantly, many Chinese are inevitably involved in this never-ending game, inquiring and being inquired about how everyone’s children are doing. In Tan’s texts, Lindo the aggressor and Suyuan the defender are typical players of this daughter competition game. Jing-mei remembers she has been compared with Waverly, who is only one month younger than her, since they were born.

From the time we were babies, our mothers compared the creases in our belly buttons, how shapely our earlobes were, how fast we healed when we scraped our knees, how thick and dark our hair, how many shoes we wore out in one year, and later, how smart Waverly was at playing chess, how many trophies she had won last month, how many newspapers had printed her name, how many cities she had visited (37).

The conflicts between Chinese immigrant mothers and the American born

daughters in Tan's narrative, display the strong influence of the traditional Chinese family values and their challenge to the American ideology on individuality. Nevertheless, in addition to cultural differences, Tan also confirms in a interview that "I think the [Chinese mother- American daughter] conflicts were both cultural and generational....[T]he cultural issues can sometimes confuse the generational ones....Anything that was unreasonable, I said was Chinese so I made the culture the scapegoat."<sup>10</sup> An example of intergenerational conflicts being mixed with cultural conflicts can be found in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. The American daughter Ruth, is constantly inspected by her mother LuLing and does not have any spare time for herself, except studying, reading, and private time in the toilet. Her fights with LuLing on the smoking issue, is a typical incident of intergenerational clash under the cover of intercultural conflict. When Ruth was caught by her mother smoking, "I'm an American," Ruth shouts: "I have a right to privacy, to pursue my own happiness, not yours" (123). Troubled by both intergenerational and cultural conflicts, the tension between the maternal authority and the daughter's rebellion reaches its peak and beyond cultural barriers in LuLing and Ruth's story, Jiangjun Zou suggests. Teenage Ruth notices LuLing secretly reading her diary. No matter where Ruth hides her diary, LuLing finds it. The writing on the open page: "STOP!!! PRIVATE!!! IF YOU ARE READING THIS YOU ARE GUILTY OF TRESPASSING!!! YES! I DO MEAN *YOU!*" is of no use to stop LuLing's scrutiny. After their fight over smoking, Ruth writes the following lines in her diary, knowing perfectly well her mother will read

<sup>10</sup> Tan, Amy. Interview. American Academy of Achievement 28 June. 1996. Achievement.org. 6 July 2011. <<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/tan0int-1>>.

them:

I hate her! She's the worst mother a person could have. She doesn't love me. She doesn't listen to me. She doesn't understand anything about me. All she does is pick on me, get mad, and make me feel worse...You talk about killing yourself, so why don't you ever do it? I wish you would. Just do it, do it, do it! Go ahead, kill yourself! Precious Auntie wants you to, and so do I (123-24)!

Haunted by the guilt of creating Precious Auntie's death and crushed by her daughter's harsh words, LuLing leans out the window and allows herself drop to the floor. She hits the cement, but fortunately, she survives this accident.

### **4.3. From Conflicts to Reconciliation**

By the daughters' linguistic approach to the mothers, the communication through the power of silence and setting mothers as the subject to express history, Tan's mothers and daughters have been trying to restore the harmony between them. However, this reconciliation is simultaneously under threat of being accused of being a negative portrayal of the Chinese community.

### 4.3.1. The Daughters' Linguistic Approach to the Mothers

Chinese words frequently appear in Tan's novels, in both Latin phonetic form like *chunwang chihan*, *waigoren*, *nengkan*, *yiding*, and *taonan*, or literal translation form such as "four splits, five cracks" and "sugar sister." Language barriers and the mothers' limited English are one reason that the Chinese mothers are *othered*. But by the recognition of the "mother tongue," Tan in her mother-daughter narratives seeks communication and understanding between two generations. In addition to the depiction of the limited English, which I defined as *her* language in Chapter 2, setting Chinese words in texts is another method for the daughter's linguistic approach to the mothers.

However, this narration style of Tan is also questioned by critics as reinforcing Orientalism through literature. For instance, in her essay, which is named "Sugar Sister," Sau-ling Wong criticizes the "authenticity" in Tan's representation of the Chinese community in her mother-daughter narrative because Tan mistranslates the Chinese word *tang jie* (elder female cousin on the father's side, 堂姐) into "Sugar sister" ("糖姐") in *The Kitchen God's Wife*,

I thought this was very generous of her, to find an excuse to let both of us accept what had happened. And that's how we came to be as close as sisters once again for the rest of the time I had left with my family. In fact, from that day forward, until I was married, we called each other *tang jie*, "sugar sister," the friendly way to refer to a girl cousin. (Tan, *Kitchen God*, 154).

The reason for this incorrect translation remains unknown. It may be a conscious

choice because of the positive meaning of the term “sugar sister,” or may be just a genuine mistake because the pronunciations of *tang* (堂) in *tang jie* is similar to *tang* (糖), in *bai tang* (sugar). Nevertheless, from Wong’s point of view, this is an example of many obvious, but minor mistakes, in Tan’s narrative that have few effects on the understanding of the storyline for her American readers but which clearly proves Tan’s inability to correctly represent Chinese culture. Moreover, Wong believes that all of these Chinese words, which are not in real Chinese form, can give the impression to American readers that Tan provides an authoritative representation of China, and Chinese culture and its people.

While there are obvious mistakes in Tan’s translation of Chinese words, I consider their appearance as representing a co-existence of two cultures and Tan’s bi-cultural experience as a descendant of Chinese immigrants. Tan’s use of Chinese words in her works to me, a reader from China, does not give an impression that her writing is a trustworthy source to understand Chinese culture, as Wong claims it is, for American readers. I view them, instead, as a source to understand the bi-cultural or multi-cultural experience and their influences on immigrant families. Through Tan’s mother-daughter narratives, Chinese and English languages frequently represent two different kinds of life and thoughts. When Jing-mei asks her mother what the differences between Chinese and Jewish mah jong are, Suyuan answers in English first and then switches to Chinese to explain, “Chinese mah jong, you must play using your head, very tricky. You must watch what everybody else throws away and keep that in your head as well. And if nobody plays well, then the game becomes like



Jewish mah jong. Why play? There's no strategy. You're just watching people make mistakes." Just as she cannot comprehend Suyuan's story about Kweilin, June is unable to understand her mother's meaning of mah jong either: "these kinds of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese" (Tan, *Joy Luck*, 34). For instance, Suyuan tells Jing-mei that the table she used in her *Joy Luck* back in Kweilin came from her family. It was made of a very fragrant red wood, "hong mu", and was not what Jing-mei called rosewood. Instead, it was a fine wood and no English word can properly describe its quality. From these conversations, we can see that English, in general, is not emotional enough for a Chinese mother and it is only a tool for communication.

Moreover, the Chinese language is also an instrument for Chinese mothers to regain their missing power. The short story at the beginning of *The Joy Luck Club's* second chapter – *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*, manifests the correlation between the immigrant mother's authority and the Chinese language. When the daughter demands to see the book *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*, which the mother is using to express maternal authority, the mother answered "It is written in Chinese. You cannot understand it. That is why you must listen to me" (87). In contrast, whereas the mothers' power is tightly bound to speaking Chinese, American born daughters tend to see English as a portal to their freedom and expression of their individuality. Rose Hsu Jordan recalls her young rebellious thoughts about her mother, "I still listened to my mother, but I also learned how to let her words blow through me. And sometimes I

filled my mind with other people's thoughts – all in English – so that when she looked at me inside out, she would be confused by what she saw" (191). Through these writings, we can see a linguistic battle between the mothers and the daughters. The use of two languages represents two kinds of power within the intercultural mother-daughter dyad.

The combination of Chinese and English words in daily conversation is a familiar situation to many Chinese overseas, both Chinese immigrants and temporary residents. This situation appears during the Chinese mothers' gathering in Suyuan's Joy Luck Club, which in Xiaoyan Xia's opinion provides these immigrant women with a home, or even "the last Eden." They can speak their own special language, half in broken English and half in Chinese dialect and enjoy the moment of being "us" again, instead of "others" in the United States. In other words, the use of the mixed language by the Chinese immigrant mothers restores their status as subject. Moreover, it is also used by Tan as a narrative strategy to give the mother her lost voice and indicate the daughter's/Tan's approach to the mother, as she said in her essay "Mother Tongue": "It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with" (7).

### 4.3.2. Communicate through the Power of Silence

In this section I would like to introduce King-Kok Cheung's theory about silence and the comparatively silent portrayal of Asian culture and Asian American community, and refer to Ken-fang Lee's idea of ghosts to discuss one kind of translation strategy that may not be exclusive to the Asian American community, but still significant during the process of portraying Asian culture in Asian American literature. As Cheung in her book *Articulate Silences* points out, because of their characteristic of quietness, Asians are often seen as "either devious, timid, shrewd, and above all, 'inscrutable' – in much the same way that women are thought to be mysterious and unknowable – or as docile, submissive, and obedience, worthy of the label 'model minority,' just as silent women have traditionally been extolled" (1). Quietness is associated with the feminine and is one important factor that leads to the feminization of Asian and Asian American men and the "East" (opposite to the "West" within the Orientalist discourse) in American popular culture. This prejudice against silence and quietness is a result of Eurocentric premises that shape the social norms toward speech and silence in North America. The emphasized voice equals power in United States society, although silence is respected by many Western thinkers and writers, and is considered necessary in the Bible: "there is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (2). Silence, on the other hand, is often negatively regarded as absence, or as "an out-of-awareness phenomenon – the ground against which the figure of talk is perceived" according to Tannen and Saville-Troike (cited in Cheung 1). The repression of the dominant culture is one kind of social force that silences the

minority groups in the United States. In the context of the Asian American community, the long existing racism against Asian immigrants, the “distorted” and “undocumented” American experiences in mainstream “history”, and prejudicial legislation, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, result in the ignorance of their presence and “oblivion” of their contributions (10-11).

To fight against this social invisibility and political inferiority brought upon their community and to improve their social status, regain their power, and reclaim masculinity for Asian American men, many younger Asian Americans favour a “more strident tone” to announce their American-ness. Their desire to be accepted as pure American even drives them to rejection of the fact that Asian culture in many aspects such as traditional Chinese and Japanese literature, does value implicit expression over explicit, compared to Western culture, and verbal restraint. As Cheung indicates, silence is “often inculcated in both Chinese and Japanese cultures and reinforced as survival strategy in the face of racism in the corresponding immigrant communities, hardly prepares a child for vocal assertion, especially when she is perceived as the Other,” while reticence reinforces the “already ingrained Western notion of the inscrutable Oriental” (6-9).

Apart from cultural and racial oppression and exclusion from the dominant culture, gender contributes to the reticence of characters created by some Asian American woman writers. Their writing shares the characteristics of women’s writing in the wider culture. Feminist critics note that women’s writing is “characterized by silence, both as a theme and as a method.” Silence, as a theme, speaks for the many

barriers to female expression, tells the forbidden, and names the unspeakable, with various methods – “irony, hedging, coded language, and muted plots.” In addition, many woman writers “distrust inherited language and decline to assert themselves as *the* voice of truth.” They do not only “question received knowledge but accentuate their own fictionality.” In order to undercut narrative authority, they often resort to devices as “dream, fantasy, and unreliable point of view; or even project their anxiety as authors onto demented characters” (4-5).

Similarly, silence in Amy Tan’s works is tightly associated with the Chinese American mother-daughter narration and has a real life background as well. “Fang pi bu-cho, cho pi bu-fang”, a phrase from Amy Tan’s mother Daisy Tan meaning: “Loud farts don’t smell, the really smelly ones are deadly silent,” implies that “[t]here’s more power in silence” (Tan, *Opposite*, 9-10). Tan “borrows” this idea from her mother and portrays some Chinese immigrant mothers as the masters of practising powerful silence as strategies to solve daily problems. In the second short story of *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*, a Chinese mother warns her American born daughter that bad things would happen if the daughter was outside the mother’s protection, because a Chinese book called *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates* says so. When the daughter rudely questions her knowledge, the Chinese mother uses silence to strike back at the girl’s insult and disobedience:

“What are they, then?” the girl demanded. “Tell me the twenty-six bad things.”

But the mother sat knitting in silence.

“What twenty-six!” shouted the girl.

The mother still did not answer her.

“You can’t tell because you don’t know! You don’t know anything!”

And the girl ran outside, jumped on her bicycle, and in her hurry to get away, she fell before she even reached the corner (87).

Following this metaphorical tale, Waverly narrates her mother Lindo’s ability to use silence as a weapon. When young Waverly returns home after her fight against Lindo, she just receives a simple sentence, “We no concerning this girl. This girl no have concerning for us”, instead of any sort of punishment. However, she is haunted by the pressure of a silent power. “Strongest wind cannot be seen,” her imagined opponent says to her in her head (Tan, *Joy Luck*, 100).

As Cheung indicates, silence can “speak many tongues, varying from culture to culture” (1). Personally speaking, in Tan’s context, this tongue of reticence is associated with Chinese culture and plays the role of translator to the American born daughter characters and readers who are relatively unfamiliar with China. Although there are criticized ethnographically incorrect elements or personal adaptation of the original cultural materials within this silence, a cultural translation is still processing through its many devices like myth, dream, folk-lore, and supernatural narratives that are frequently seen in Tan’s novels.

For example, through Tan’s narrative, readers can stride over the boundary between Yin and Yang, the two worlds for the dead and the living. Ghosts and psychic experiences are outstanding elements in Tan’s fiction. Kwan of *The Hundred Secret*

*Senses* claims that she has yin eyes. And they allow her to see the dead in the world of the living. She also has the capacity of communicating with the Yin world, the land of the dead. She can recall her past life as Nunumu, a Hakka maiden who worked for a group of foreign missionaries in nineteenth century China. Furthermore, she has swapped her body with another girl of her village and survives a deadly flood. Her American half sister Olivia grows up with Kwan's various supernatural stories about the Yin world, with ghosts around them, and their tragic past life which is ended when the Qing government cracks down on the Hakka Christian rebels – the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Both Nunumu and Olivia's last life ego, Miss Banner, are killed by the ruthless Manchu soldiers, who are considered non-Chinese in Tan's works. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, LuLing is constantly haunted by the ghost of Precious Auntie, LuLing's suicidal real mother, and the family curse. Her daughter Ruth played the role of a psychic for her and "sends" Precious Auntie's message by written text in a sand tray for years. Bibi Chen, the protagonist and narrator of *Saving Fish from Drowning*, has even died from an accident at the beginning of the story and turns into a ghost. The whole story of the American tourist group is from Bibi's experience as a supernatural and invisible being, who accompanies her friends during their journey from China to Burma. As translators of Chinese culture and history, Kwan and LuLing lead their sister and daughter into exploring the buried past, which is silenced by the dominant culture, and opens a window for Olivia, Ruth, and readers to understand the culture that is often denied by many Chinese Americans, but is still influential in their personalities, life, and the interactions with other racial groups,

with the implicit devices of silence. And the narration of Bibi Chen's ghost widens this intercultural communication from a Chinese-American range to a Chinese-American-Burma range. These supernatural incidents and message exchanges are defined as one special type of searching for harmony in Jianjun Zou's analysis of Tan. Ken-feng Lee points out that ghosts stand for the "incommensurable cultural differences", "the haunting past and the cultural memory of the immigrant sisters and mothers, waiting to be remembered and then exorcised" (116). To these Chinese immigrant women, personalized translation of the Chinese supernatural beliefs, serves the present demands of regaining lost identity, acceptance and understanding from their Americanized offspring who will understand what the cause of their sorrow is and what shapes them into who they are at last.

The comparatively silent metaphor, in Tan's mother-text of *The Kitchen God's Wife*, is used to express her good intention for her daughter Pearl and sustain the harmonious relation they find through the truth of Winnie's past and sorrow. At the end of Winnie's narrative, she purchases a status which is accidentally unnamed by the factory. She writes a new made up name "Lady Sorrowfree" on the bottom of this status then gives it to Pearl as a present (415). When the daughters finally begin to listen to the silence and learn how to use the power of this invisible force, reconciliation between the mother and the daughter is achieved in some of Tan's daughter narratives. For instance, in *The Joy Luck Club*, Lena's story ends in a metaphoric dialogue between her and her mother Ying-ying, who wants to save her from the painful marriage. Instead of telling Lena that she should leave her husband



directly, Ying-ying just pushes over the “marble end table” and lets the black vase break on the floor (165). Apparently, it looks as if they are only talking about the collapsed table and the broken vase. However, Ying-ying’s question: “Then why you don’t stop it” (165) indicates the purpose of her behaviour and this dialogue. Similarly to Lena, Rose Hsu Jordan is also troubled by her painful marriage. At the end of her story, she finally regains her long gone independence and individuality to defend her rights when her husband Ted wants to be divorced. Her re-empowerment, like Lena’s, is from the knowledge of metaphor that her mother An-mei passed to her. When she was still young, An-mei told her,

“A girl is like a young tree,” she said. “You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. That is the only way to grow strong and straight. But if you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak. You will fall to the ground with the first strong wind. And then you will be like a weed, growing wild in any direction, running along the ground until someone pulls you out and throws you away (191).

In Rose’s opinion, when An-mei told her this story, it was too late for her to grow like a tree because she “had already begun to bend” (191). Nevertheless, in her last phone call with Ted, she asks him to come to their house and shows him a disordered garden to highlight her request: she will keep the house and Ted “can’t just pull [her] out of [his] life and throw [her] away” (196). Even if she has turned into a weed, she wants to be strong and stand her ground. After this metaphoric articulation, Rose gets what she wants: Ted is “confused and scared” and “He was *hulihudu*” (196).

### 4.3.3. Seeing the Mothers as Narrative Subject

Chinese American women have also been depicted and explored in the works of many Asian American woman writers, such as Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, Joyce Kogawa's *Obasan*, and Chuang Hua's *Crosings*. However, unlike these works, in which "the theme of matrilineage revolves around the figure of the daughter," Marina Heung suggests that Tan's mother-daughter narrative in *The Joy Luck Club* represent a "new family romance to move the mother 'from object to subject'" (598). In my opinion, this subjectivation of the Chinese mothers, who are *othered* for being the maternal figure to the daughter and "aliens" from a different culture background, is the third type of reconciliation in Amy Tan's novels.

Compared to Tan's matrilineal writing in her other novels, her fourth published novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter* in this analysis of reconciliation among generations is outstanding for providing a grandmother-text. As Tan indicated, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is "dedicated to them [her mother and her grandmother]. Li Binzi and Gu Jingmei." By naming the book in this way, Tan highlights the differences between this work and her other mother-daughter narratives. When other terms such as "Joy Luck Club," "Kitchen God's wife," and "hundred secret senses" all imply the immigrant mother/older sister, the term "bonesetter's daughter" stands for the mother of the Chinese immigrant woman and the grandmother of the American daughters. Moreover, even if the writing style is not in autobiographical form, Precious Auntie, unlike other grandmothers in Tan's works, actually narrates her own

story with written text. Her text is a mother-text within LuLing's mother-text. This arrangement leads to several different characteristics of *The Bone Setter's Daughter*.

Firstly, it separates Tan's works from the talk-story type of narrating that is featured in Kingston's works, as I described in Chapter 2. Secondly, the narrative of Precious Auntie extends the dimension of international conflicts from the dimension of mother-daughter to the dimension of grandmother-mother-daughter. Thirdly, by writing the grandmother Precious Auntie's and the daughter Ruth's stories with third person narration, but using autobiographical form in LuLing's narrative, Tan somehow enforces the Chinese mothers' subjectivity: this immigrant mother, is both the daughter and the mother. At last, it creates a direct interaction and communication between the grandmother and the daughter, with the mother as the crucial media. At the end of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, when Ruth begins to write a story about her matrilineal family history, reconciliation among three generations is restored: "[i]t [the story Ruth is writing] is for her grandmother, for herself, for the little girl who became her mother" (307).

Nevertheless, the mother-text in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* still has a debatable feature that is indicated by critics such as Patricia Chu and Xiujuan Yu: when the mother-text aims at the harsh past of the Chinese immigrant mothers, the narration about the difficulties that they encounter in the United States is comparatively limited. How these mothers cope with the culture shock and prejudices when they have just arrived in the US cannot be found in Tan's writings. While the tragedy and the pain in their life in China are detailed, the absence of their early life in

the United States, means the mother-daughter narrative shows a tendency to create a “utopian view of [US] immigration,” according to Patricia Chu (143). In Chinese scholar Xiujuan Yu’s opinion, the brief or even absent narration of the mothers’ early experience in the US is one proof of Tan’s orientalist writing of the Chinese experience, because as Chu, Yu believes it covers the negative side of US society. Referring to Amy Ling’s introduction of the correlation between the Chinese-US diplomatic relations and the images of China, I conclude that the creation of orientalist stereotypes of the Chinese is related to the history in my discussion of the mother’s *othered* racial identity. In the terms of the “utopian view of [US] immigration,” it is worth noting that the first two decades (1950s-1960s) of Chinese immigrant mothers’ life in the US, is the period of “hostility” because of the Cold War background and the close relations between Communist China and the USSR. Therefore, the subjectivation of the Chinese mothers by telling their stories seems unbalanced, when the effects of the Cold War and the fear of communism are dodged.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

In her chapter of “Motherhood and Daughterhood,” Adrienne Rich suggests that “[w]omen are made taboo to women” and “[i]n breaking this taboo, we are reuniting with our mothers; in reuniting with our mothers, we are breaking this taboo” (255). Reconciliation among generations in Tan’s mother-daughter narratives breaks the obstacles created by international and intercultural conflicts between the mother

and the daughter. The complex emotion of the daughter is a combination of both the love for her mother and the fear of becoming her mother, “Matrophobia” (235). This emotion, on the one hand, leads to the daughter’s desire to seek her mother, and on the other hand, makes the daughter long to be separated from the mother and obtain her subjectivity. In the case of Chinese immigrant families, this emotion is even more complicated when cultural differences are involved. However, through the talk-story, written text, and metaphor in comparatively “quite” forms, the mothers and the daughters are granted opportunities to regain reconciliation among generations.

The search for reconciliation among generations through the recognition of the “mother tongue” and the subjectivation of the mothers, creates both harmonious status in the narrative and the argument about the orientalist writing (airing dirty laundry) writing of the Chinese community. But once again, is it necessary for an artist to correctly narrate the historical and cultural background in her fiction? The answer can be debatable and complex. Limited English is used in the stereotype writing of the Chinese people and it sheds a negative light on the Chinese community (and hurts many Chinese and Chinese American’s sensitive feelings). But one fact that needs to be seen is that the group of Chinese people whose English is limited do exist in real life, for instance, Tan’s mother Daisy Tan. By narrating the story in this language Tan achieves her purpose of giving her mother a text that is “[s]o easy to read” (Tan, “Mother Tongue,” 8) and from which Daisy, the real life Chinese immigrant mother, can see what her daughter remembers and has learnt from her. Towards the social and political background, on the one hand, Tan’s narration of the mother’s experience in

the US is maybe seen as proof of orientalist writing to cover the negative side of the United States. On the other hand, perhaps, it is also a strategy to drive the attention away from the still existing fear of Communism in the US, and find reconciliation between the American daughters and the Chinese mothers, who are inevitably attached to the image of China, even if one reason for them to leave their motherland is their fear of Communism as well.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

With regard to the name of this thesis, “Airing Dirty Laundry”, can we just simply ask: Does Tan’s works contain stereotypical writing of the Chinese community? The answer to this question is certain, from what has been written about Chinese men in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. However, through my analysis in this project, I want to suggest that her novels are a search for reconciliation between two cultures, two genders, and among three matrilineal generations—the grandmothers, the mothers, and the daughters, if we consider them as a whole. With her five published novels,<sup>11</sup> Tan’s writing of the Chinese community is a counter-strike against the accusation from some radical critics, according to whom she is an orientalist writer or even a “fake” Chinese American writer. Judging by her writing of the theme of reconciliation, Tan provides us with a multi-dimensional depiction of the Chinese community in both China and in the United States.

The concept of reconciliation that I utilize in this thesis is from the traditional Chinese concept of *He* 和, which suggests that harmony comes from the cooperation of different elements and the balance of Yin and Yang. Translation is the most noticeable type of reconciliation in my opinion. Different cultures that are defined and expressed by different languages can only communicate through the process of translation. To understand the immigrant mothers and their good intentions, and to tell these mothers’ stories to the US public, translation from Chinese to English is required because these mothers are attached to Chinese culture and language. To

<sup>11</sup> The sixth is coming in November, 2011, according to the information updated on Tan’s *Facebook* page.

provide an opportunity for Chinese people to understand the overseas Chinese community in US, translation from English to Chinese is essential. However, it is also necessary to be aware of the negative side of this strategy of searching for reconciliation through translation. When translation can create more opportunities for communication, it can also bring more confusion and misunderstandings to us. Translation mistakes and rewriting of the original texts appear in Tan's texts, the film adaptation of her *The Joy Luck Club*, and the Chinese version of her novels, especially *Saving Fish from Drowning*, along with the rewriting of the original texts. But translation should not and cannot be avoided during cultural communications, and it is an essential strategy for reconciliation.

The reconciliation between Chinese men and women is built up on Tan's writing of the counter-images of Chinese men in her *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and *Hundred Secret Senses*, which present a type of gender relations that are different from *The Joy Luck Club* and the major story line in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Moreover, the use of Chinese mythologies and folklores are often gendered in Chinese American literature. The discussion of the presentation of Chinese men is associated with the debate on how Chinese culture shall be represented in fiction works of Chinese American writers. Differently from Chin's argument in his "Come All Ye," mythologies and folklores have been changed by Chinese people, and many of them are different from or even contradict Chinese history. In addition, if rewriting of Chinese myths and legends is a reason to define a writer as "fake", then Chin is unreal as well, for his personalized explanation of Confucianism and his rewriting of



Chinese culture in his novels.

The reconciliation among generations is the purpose of Tan's fiction writing of the troubled daughters, her *othered* mothers and the lost grandmothers. Intergenerational and intercultural conflicts are both influential on the mother-daughter relations in Tan's narrative. The mothers are *othered* for being the maternal figure for which the daughter is longing and rejecting at the same time, for both the Chinese daughters who later become Chinese immigrant mothers, and the American-born daughters. Combined with the intercultural conflicts, the intergenerational conflicts become more radical in the mother-daughter relations. But by the mother tongue, the knowledge and the mothers' good intentions carried by comparatively "silent" metaphors, the daughters can finally understand or begin to understand their mothers. Furthermore, by her writing method of setting the mothers as the subject in the narrative, the Chinese mothers can tell their story from their perspective, to the daughter and the readers who see through the daughter's eyes.

At last, I consider reactions from some Chinese and Chinese American critics, such as Frank Chin and Xiujuan Yu, as the overacting representatives of the "racial victimhood of the Chinese community."

The term "racial victimhood of the Chinese community" is inspired by African American scholar Devon W. Carbado's article "Black Male Racial Victimhood." In this essay Carbado argues that "black men occupy a privileged victim status in antiracist discourse." Because of this victim status, "when an individual Black man is on trial for some criminal offense, the Black community sees first and foremost his

status as a racial victim.” Furthermore, when “the alleged crime involves violence against women, the fact that a Black female or a woman of any race may be the victim of Black male aggression is subordinate to the concern that a Black man may be the victim of a racist criminal justice system” (337). In other words, if a black man has committed domestic violence, the black community’s primary concern would be whether this man will be violated by the justice system rather than the victim’s behalf. With regard to the issue whether blacks can openly discuss domestic violence against black women, Cabado points out that there are some black critics who are disapproving of this idea. Although his name is not listed in Cabado, Ishmael Reeds is no doubt one of these critics, who stand against the negative portrayals of the African American community by black writers.

To me, it seems likely that in order to protect black men from being further violated by racism and “broken” (343) by white racists, black women who are violated and broken by both racism and the domestic violence against women should be suffocated. Referring to Carbado’s analysis, it is not difficult to identify the Chinese version of racial victimhood. When Chinese American men have been endangered and threatened by white racists, it has been deemed necessary within the Chinese community to silence the even more oppressed group, Chinese women, from expressing their experience as victims of patriarchal power of China, in order to prevent the exacerbation of anti-Chinese prejudice. This racial victimhood might be helpful to understand the attacks on Tan from Chin and other critics.

The racial victimhood of the Chinese community does not only exist in the

gender issues, but also in the process of comprehending cultural issues. Racism and prejudices from the white dominant culture in the United States and from the Western nations towards China make the Chinese community become fragile. When Chinese men have been suffering from violation of stereotypes since the middle of the nineteenth century, the Chinese culture and society as a whole have been facing similar problems and threats from the West.

However, it does not mean that avoiding any negative portrayals of the Chinese society is appropriate. If the depiction reveals the truth and actually existing problems, it shall not be simply bashed and defined as stereotype writing of the Chinese community. In Amy Tan's case, her five novels need to be seen as a whole and a multi-dimensioned portrayal of Chineseness, which is associated with the concept of harmony/reconciliation.

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